The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The long, shining table: writers in Eastern Europe

by Hortense Calisher

Home now from the two Berlins, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, from the smaller cities of Ljubljana and Sarajevo in Yugoslavia, Timisoara, Cluj, and Sibiu in Romania—and from meeting a procession of novelists, poets, intellectuals of other disciplines, students, professors, and cultural commissars along the way—why am I finding the writers' faces the hardest to remember?

I can summon at once the high-collared head man at the Institute of Literary Sciences in Budapest, saying the name of their patron "Lukács?" at me, like an alchemist testing me on a gold I mightn't know. Or the acolyte face of the woman professor in Cluj, asking me for the names of new British novels as if asking for bread. Or the chilly smile of that university Rector: "The Fulbright professor here, also a woman. Why does your country keep sending us women?" Or the flushed young professor running up to me clutching a worn paperback of one of my books, saying "Did you write this? You did? I can't believe you're here" (meaning—how did they let you in?). Which face, when I asked where it had obtained the book, closed softly, "Oh, somewhere. Maybe, from a friend." Dozens of other faces I can still see plainly, all the clearer for the unremitting winter light. Or in a patch of sunlight in Ljubljana, or in the acrid, yellow soft-coal air of Sarajevo. Each with its anecdote safely attached.

But the writers of Eastern Europe? Barring a few known to the world or to one personally, their faces begin to interpenetrate even as one looks at them. I see them from here as I saw them then, grouped always around the long boardroom table, the same shining, official table that travels from city to city, country to country, writers union to writers union.

Union headquarters may resemble one another the world over, but all the more so when government money is behind them. Those in the Socialist-Democratic countries are uniquely showplaces as well. From a distance of more than miles, nearer shame and fear, I'll try to distinguish them.

Beige carpeting, modern sofas, old friends (though their conversation is stiff here)—this is Belgrade. That night at the Writers Club restaurant, where we'll see Arthur Goldberg in from the Belgrade human rights conference, and, at the Artists Club the next night, Robert de Niro in from a movie, the atmosphere will be thick with talk. But that's only eat-and-drink; this is a union meeting, in the morning. Our friends there, known to us since 1965 or so, are now in varying states of favor, or accord, with the government. Or with us. Some have had books denied publication by the very editors (of government-subsidized publishing houses) they're sitting next to (as was also the case at a party given us the night before). It has happened that such a book is bid for by an American publishing house, but its writer does not accept. Censorship can be

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cozily administered and suffered here, in a way that Americans, given to lawcourts and outraged rhetoric, simply cannot visualize. The meeting itself is mostly salutation. (Except when I'm approached by an old P.E.N. pal who mourns the time when the International Congresses were sociable; why do we Americans keep bringing up writers-in-prison lists which turn out not to be true? He has checked theirs with "the Ministry," who told him the names on it were terrorists. I answer that P.E.N. will certainly recheck—with Amnesty International.) When our presence at the Union is reported next day in *Politika,* our Embassy is surprised—never been done before. (And we don't know who at which evening party to ascribe it to.) The paper has named all Yugoslav writers present—except one. Nobody is surprised. Out of favor, one is faceless altogether. Better than violence, it's said. Perhaps, for a man like that one, who is psychologically able to manage it.

But in a city further on, we hunt up a well-known writer who hasn't been to his Union for a long time. Since he lost his teaching job, he's been selling encyclopedias, door to door. Nobody prevents him. We brought him with us to his own Union. Some there knew his work but had never met him. They said they were glad to. Some did not say. Recently, he saved up enough money to spend two weeks in a Paris hotel—nobody forbade it—where he found he could write again. "I get paranoid here." Facelessness is not for the frail.

I recall the Union in Ljubljana because it was opposite the arched red drink-rooms of the old Hotel Metropole, an Austro-Hungarian-Empire Claridge's battered by the years into a Socialist pothouse. From there we crossed a darkish street, lurid with other cafés, climbed a steep stair—"Apologies, we're renovating"—climbed another flight to the restaurant, outside which we hung our coats (they're always renovating, or have already handsomely done so, and there's always a restaurant, the lucky sods), after which we entered a room with the same long, shining—yes.

But at which of those many tables, when admiring the elegant nineteenth-century *boiserie* of the salon it had been placed in, did I get the hesitant answer: "Before, it belonged to a rich family," and in which similar salon, the more confiding: "It belonged to a rich Jew"? Before.

"Before *what*?" I ask once, finally goaded to it. That time receiving the cloudy reply, "The war." Ordinarily I know enough to tread tactfully past the "former" origins of anything, from a Ministry (palace), to a National Gallery (stocked with confiscated paintings), or from a publishing collective to the glossy book itself, handed me fresh with government ink. "Before" can mean so many things. *Before*—in the time when we were all partisans—to one set of circumstances. *Before*—when we were not yet rehabilitated—to quite another set of these.

. . . Before, dear visitor, my face, renovated ever so slightly by the book it agreed not to publish, or by the book "they" did agree to publish, grew so to resemble the other guarded ones at this table, all of us floating together now in this gold-dark pool of 40-Watt European light. From which, dear American, I perhaps reach to hand you a guest whisky, smiling slightly when you prefer the *slivovitz* or the *ţuica*: we know that attitude, American. Or perhaps I am the—usually—older face bending cavalier to tell you of my travels in New York and Washington, to chuckle a just slightly anti-my-own-government joke—meanwhile handing you my printed-in-English visiting card. (Yes, there's always one of me, and you may well suspect what I am.) Or I sit with closed poet-face, though I may not be a poet, madame, at the table's end, or in a voluble line of hothead young activists and cool-chinned critics, one of whom hasn't taken kindly the remark that Hemingway is no longer a contemporary, since he is still publishing safely non-controversial evaluations of him—and I do not speak at all . . .

No doubt that particular face is bored with it all. After the second union hall, I can not only spot the typed faces but can predict the typed interchange, riposte and

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rebuff, which will literally come between us. I do this with pain. For these are writers, and maybe we both know that I should be looking not at the faces and speeches above table, but at their linked feet, chained together in a communal marriage of convenience by the glossy-paged government.

First come the flowery introductions and stylized disclaimers, the whole bit merely more elegant in the cities, more insistent in the provinces.

"On your right, Madame, the finest . . . critic . . . historian . . . poet in—"

Slovenia was it? Or were we already over the border into Romania, where my Yugoslav pronunciation of Timisoara—Timis*chva*—would be stiffly corrected?

"Oh no, my dear fellow, no!" comes modestly from the one so introduced—no matter which country.

"Yes, my dear Laszlo, yes!"

Laszlo. Are we in Hungary, then? Not necessarily. The largest ethnic minority in Romania is Hungarian. Just before we left London, the *Guardian* was reporting that in line with a general program of assimilation the Romanians were closing the Hungarian medical college, and in Budapest itself, Gyula Illyes, Hungary's best-known poet and man of letters, had talked of it all through lunch. In Romania, when I dare mention the matter to a group of professors of literature, not a face flickers during the pause that follows—but perhaps they were looking beyond the Carpathians, beyond Transylvania to the corner of Moldavia which Russia had nipped.

For what you learn early in what used to be "the Balkans" is not only that everybody still has a shard of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in him—in his manners if not his heart—but also that everybody is looking East. In three countries, each more Easterly, I'll have whispered at me that that "It" will be worse in the next one. We all know without saying what "It" is. The whole amalgam of censorship, from facelessness to forced flight. (When I was given the explanation for those long-shut or derelict synagogues which stud Romanian towns, "They wanted to go," I was reminded of the vague acknowledgment, in another country entirely, that a writer had left its capital city: "She's in Switzerland, I think. She wanted to go.") From forced flight the next step is imprisonment. The whole process ending in murder, maybe? Only farther East.

There is a face, sometimes at the end of the table or sometimes in profile right next to me, which is always the special one. This is the face which knows that "It" is right here.

Suddenly that face speaks. "What are the functions of the writers unions in America? For instance—in New York?"

His English may be good; though usually not so good as that spoken by the member who's been to New York maybe several times—*Hah, I love it*—who will be the government man, more or less. Often a white-haired survivor of regimes. Close to whatever Cultural Commissar. Eager to make jokes—often at Communist expense. Though not just now.

I don't want this confrontation. These are *writers.* My quarrel is not with them . . . Or is that what I'm here for?

"We don't have them."

"You don't have them!" In that special face, often proud as a medal thumbed thin by four hundred years of a literary-scholarly tradition whose parchments still seem to tinge the air, and maybe sophisticate from more recent campaigns I can only suspect, an eyebrow lifts. "*How* do you publish?"

Yes—that's why I'm here. To speak *single,* with someone who has to speak double. Hesitating before I answer him, I recall the girl student, two universities back, who rose nervously, casting a smothered giggle at those behind her obviously urging her on. (She wouldn't get into trouble, I was told later; she'd phrased her wide-eyed question carefully.) "But isn't it *dangerous,*" she'd said, "not to have censorship?"

To her I'd answered: "We consider it dangerous to *have* it." And heard that drop like a pin. In the University of— , I dropped it. A small Western pin.

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Even two countries back, apologizing for a cold, I'd caught myself adding pompously, "An idea is like a cold; you can't stop it from traveling." And was answered by the smiling veteran there, "You didn't get that cold here." Or that idea? I am learning to speak double, too.

"Alone," I say now. "We publish on our own." The vowels resound, mournfully.

"Each by himself?" The face—rather pale, this one—screws in a faint grimace. I'm not sure what it favors. Nor is the watching table.

"We have no clubs, either. No one club. Where you can meet everybody in the evening." Where everybody had better be.

"You're a big country." Has the face pinkened? "The world knows your literature. Ours is small. Not in a world language. We try to keep it alive."

Everybody nods solemnly. True, the fires of provincial rivalry have always flamed high in these parts, both within a country and across borders, Magyars against Romanians, Serbs against Croats, with sometimes a general hunting-license out, against the gypsies, or the Jews. Nowadays, these prideful domestic flarings are encouraged because they serve another purpose—siphoning off the anger, or the activity, which otherwise might be more broadly anti-government. Yet, what solitary New York literary guerrilla, trekking off to the backroom at Elaine's, or shuddering away from such, or haring off to Iowa or Berkeley for a bout of left-bank companionship, doesn't understand this huddling toward Parnassus on a cold winter's night?

"New York has unions," the white-haired man says sourly. "When I was there, the garbage. *Pfui.*"

"Powerful unions," I say. "Longshoremen, elevator operators. Truckers. But we writers are *so* hard to organize." I hold out my glass for more drink. "It's not the strikes we're afraid of." Who would care? "But what if we should all—begin to agree?"

Then what a smell of garbage. *Pfui.*

But things are very clean here. A stout lady who's been serving us from behind refills my glass. Housekeeper here? She wears a dowager's hat. (Now and then we encounter women at Union meetings—in Yugoslavia perhaps twice. The writer Jara Ribnikar, from a long-powerful press family early identified with Tito, and another who's an international Vice President of P.E.N. Maybe a third one, who never spoke.) Elsewhere, the meetings we see, union or not, are predominantly masculine. In Hungary, which has no union, a few of the poets in the *New Hungarian Quarterly* are women, and many translators are. Meanwhile, in the Romanian universities we meet a tribe of lady-teachers (there's no other word for it), devotees in our own American style of forty years back. Passionate for books, often learned, inspirers of students but with small hope of administrative influence, they serve cake and drink after our platform appearances while falling meekly back from any conversations entered into with us by the more august male faculty, beg me agitatedly for news of literature while they hand me roses for being a woman—and altogether break my heart.

An American literature issue of a writers union review is now passed down the table to me. Dated a few years back, it contains, in addition to the article on Hemingway, one which appears to be set in San Francisco (in which I can pick out allusions to Jaky [sic] Kennedy, Bank America, and Wall Street); a short piece on the Declaration of Independence, which I wish I could read; an article which contains a lot of the right names—Poe, Hawthorne, James, London, Glasgow, Cather, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams—and ends with Faulkner and Wolfe; plus a double-page spread on poets who *are* contemporary: Duncan, Stafford, Simpson, Wakoski, Wright, Creeley, Bly, Wilson (Keith). Since I can't read the language, I remark on the illustrations: Gilbert Stuart, a Hudson River steamboat, and the Blackfoot Indians for the Declaration, a Ryder with two men in a boat for Hemingway, a Maurice Prendergast, and a Grant Wood. When I ask who chose all these, they show little interest. "Probably from a book."

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Production will be centralized in any case, and their art books—like the Russian ones always marvelously beyond any we do on a mass scale, as well as cheap—are a relatively safe currency on the cultural exchange.

Poetry is the other. An honest poem may still take up very little ideological space—or can appear to—and, since few poets lack poems which are non-controversial, choosing those can avoid more definite acts of censorship. Yet there's a nobler reason for the circulation of poetry in these countries (perhaps in Hungary particularly). In all, poetry here is by tradition more pervasively honored—and read—by the general population than is ever the case with us.

"Just how *do* you deal with a publisher, in America?" The critic has the darting eyes which understand power.

I draw a long breath. "Dollars." And grin. "Isn't that what you expect me to say?" In the timid laughter which follows, chatter does break out; I hear the English word "paperback." They want to know—just the way any lay group at home does—"How much?"

I tell them that a first novel can sell for as little as a thousand, or for as much as a million, as one did last year. It's a matter of trend, chance, luck, as well as material, I say—and yes, always between writer and publisher. No, no one regulates in any other sense. Although an Author's League exists (I describe its activities in the field of copyright), no writer has to belong to it, nor any publisher abide by its suggested contract specifications.

"Oh, we're very lax," I sigh in conclusion. "Our writers will not be organized on *anything*." I add what I also said to the girl student. "Of course, it's part of the American tradition—to be anti-government."

This is my first acknowledgment that I understand their union is government. I wonder if the men here know that Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is on one of their universities' reading lists. Perhaps a lady-teacher put it there.

Whitehair can't stand this any longer. "How many copies of a book of poems sell in America? What is the size of the usual edition of them?"

I see he already knows. "Three thousand at the outside, often less. Of course poets like Lowell and a few others—probably more, much more."

Whitehair points down the table. "His last book of poems—sixty thousand copies. Sold out—the third day."

My paleface. I salute him. He flushes dark red.

Under his jacket, between it and his shirt, I see he's wearing a sleeveless knitted vest of the kind often worn by British dons. He could pass for one. That same slouch of quizzical sloppiness. The same facial lines, refined by questioning. How has he come to be here, next to old Whitehair—a corsair plying between literature and government, if ever I saw one.

All at the table must think I'm here for my country on the same terms they and he are for theirs. I know I'm not.

"Listen . . ." I speak with a full voice. And yes, doubly. Half of it for home. "*We* have a kind of censorship. Hidden in the money. A book might not get to be liked by any publisher. Or not find one willing to—invest in it. When I was a young writer, we were told that a good book would always find publication somehow, that publishers felt obliged to. Many of them did. We only hope to believe that now."

"Such *stoff,* I saw," Whitehair blurts out. "On the newsstalls, in the shops. Even in a professor's house I see the children reading. Such—" His eyes and nose narrow toward the word, find it. "Junk." His pleasure at finding the exact word overrides even his propaganda. I recognize with an admissive shock that here is a writer, too.

"Enormous junk," I agree. "But never . . . official junk." (Do I overstate that? Think of the *Congressional Record.*) "Not from us." What balm to say—what is still essentially so. "Of course we do have some government *support* of the arts. More often, the performing arts." I feel obliged, though, to tell them of the National Endowment's funding of little magazines, its trickle of scholarships.

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"Like England. Though not nearly as much. But in the English style." (The American style, actually. Whereby the government funds art geographically, a little sweetnin' for every state pot. But still, I take heart.) "Government doesn't otherwise interfere."

They'll believe that about the English. The whole world credits the English style of civil rights—with both capitalism and the other socialisms not too sorry to see them running out of money. But I'm not sure this table believes it about us. Surely the dollar will influence us in even more than taste?

Paleface speaks up. "Your books—so expensive. Ours—anybody can buy."

Whitehair nods approvingly.

I look down the table at the fourteen men seated there in those attitudes which Rembrandt has made so intently human. There, without the burgher's hat, is still the bourseman whose lids droop toward the main chance; there the chin-in-hand go-along-with-it drifter; there the old buccaneer, leaning back. And there, crouched for the sprint, a "young Turk."

"*Selected* books," I say, with the politest smile I can muster. "Yes. Very cheap."

And with what dram of flesh have both audience and author paid for the privilege of low price, wide audience? None of these men can publish without the agreement of all or most of them, subject to the approval of bigger guns at the top. Behind each man here stands the shadowy presence of one of the faceless, who has paid even more.

Yet even in those here, retreated again like me for a moment's impasse silence, one can sense Europe's ancient literary-scholarly tradition running narrow but deep. My first-met writer from that tradition was the poet Walter Mehring, after his flight from Hitler. To re-read his *The Lost Library* (his father's, Vienna) forty years later is to see him now as almost the last. These countries oriented to the east of Vienna, cut off by lack of a major language, keep a strange, not quite embalmed version of that devotion. Like "modern" Russian book-illustration, it can have the nostalgic charm of forty years ago—and, similarly, the spirit in which the old craft is entered upon may have little to do with the contents. The men here, resigned to the rarity of their being known abroad, are always touting their one or two Nobel prize-winners of the past, even though one sees they suspect the world has forgotten; they do this touting for themselves. No wonder if for some the opportunities of Marxian distribution attract. Or that all of them, crowding under the umbrellas of their sequestered heritages, cling parochially close.

I used to think that only distance kept American writers from that kind of bonding—too many air-miles between the cafés. Now I see it is our common heritage that does this. Though we may meet each other in guilds and universities, though we can clump like iron filings to the magnet of a cause, or have our social or sexual allegiances or loyalties to what still may be locale, underneath, every serious writer I know is committed—by far more than temperament—to going it alone. Underlying all critical assessment, this is the most powerful factor in our literature—and we inherit it.

Half of that independence is noble. As custodians of the word, we undertake the living-out of its always fragile liberties. We will not be unionized by government, or by God, or, without difficulty, even by ourselves.

But what about the other half of that heritage, which can well almost nullify the other. Who listens—to us?

The lady in the hat is now serving cakes and coffee. I've a writer friend in whose illustrious house lunch is still served by white-gloved footmen; the flourish of this lady's wrist, the incline of her chin—"These people are *worth* serving"—is exactly theirs. Is she one of Paleface's readers? No matter; she knows her aristocrats.

What these men write is considered to be important. So necessary to the nation that if they say the "wrong" thing, they can go to prison for it.

"We came over your border by the night train," I say. "Every compartment had soldiers in it. When we tried to enter one which

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had only one soldier, he motioned us away." Brusquely, though he was very young. "We were down the aisle still trying when the conductor came running up and ushered us back into that very compartment. The soldier was gone. When I asked the American Embassy officer who was seeing us off how this had come about, he said: 'I told them you two were the heads of the writers union in the U.S.A.'"

Are they going to laugh?

They overlaugh. We all do.

The coffee's not very good; it too is political. Our hosts' country, we've heard, buys goodwill from certain African new nations whose coffee happens to be poor. The woman has done her best with it, in the old infusion style. So much here is so deceptively—in the old style.

How shall I say to them what I want to? That though they are in their compartment, I am also, not too nobly, in mine? How can I say it, to my own country?

That these writers in front of me, however compromised, or whether or not they want to be political, are "official" in another sense, long lost to us. That their nation, like much of Europe, has long awarded them a respected role in its history, not only as watchdogs of the ethics of nations, but also as enunciators of the powers of life—and that this still goes far deeper in the national fabric than it does with us. So it was that arts-and-letters once helped conspire a revolution. So it is that a revolution still wary of their significance has shanghaied them into its service. So it is, paradoxically, that in Russia and all its orbit writers have impact comparable to the scientists'—and have equal perils—since in both people's mind and the regime's their influence is real.

Once, when we Americans were fresh from Europe, that was so with us. We writers helped frame Declarations, went as ambassadors. But what writer could now be even in the Customs Office, as Hawthorne and Melville were, on the basis of writer qualification alone? Which of us goes abroad in our government's diplomatic or consular service, or serves it prominently at home as so many European and Asiatic writers have done, and do? With our statesmen, the books only come after.

As for us, we're culturally funded now, though not like the "performers." In the minds of most Americans, a serious writer is a cultural ornament—"resource" is the official term—which our standard of living can afford but our ears need not too closely attend. Unlike doctors and lawyers, the press and political "scientists," football coaches and corporation presidents, we have small authority with the public. We are not perceived as working with actionable truth.

That's partly why I'm here at this shiningly united, durably suspect table. It still rests me, to be in any country where the connections between books and life are real.

I first learned that in a bistro in France, where an old man of "the people," hearing what I was, raised his fist in salute, and spoke deeply into the zinc table—of books. It's honorable, to be addressed by a farmer as a kindred farmer of the intellect, producing fruit of a kind for which those gnarled knuckles have reached. It's ennobling, to be honored not for your own name or books, but in the name of all writers, for that thin trickle of whatever words that another life considers to have ennobled or counseled it. There can be places, too, where the province of poetry is almost coincidental with the boundaries of the nation, or the moral suasion of the drama as influential as that of the church; I learned that up in the gallery of the old Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, crammed in a warp of Cockney debate, some of it with fists, as to who was right, who wrong in a play of Massinger's, while downstage the Elizabethan syllables went on. Finally, I am learning that it's inspiriting to be where writers can be dangerous—when armed only with words.

So, as now, sometimes I rove. To see my kind, yes, and as some sort of reminder, maybe heartening to a few, of those inalienable rights some writers still have. But also, I wander to witness those other hazards which our country once understood to be

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the other half of that privilege. Oddly enough, sometimes my own State Department will send me. As a kind of currency more valued abroad.

"Funny—" I say now. How can I best express the terrible paradox? "With us, writers are prophets without much honor. Where you can write what you want, nobody in particular becomes a hero for it."

Freedom can become so forgettable, I think, awed, that you don't hear the sound of it. In the general din of it. "So you're right; we're not listened to on the level you are. Partly because"—and how long and hard I've mulled this—"because we're not imprisonable for it."

So I have said it. To them. A grim exchange.

"But we do have—one reality," I say, faltering. "When any of us does speak, what you hear is a single voice."

Brought up as I have been, as all Americans have been, is it treason to think of that as not enough?

I rise to go. "Thank you all very much." They rise, too. We walk toward each other without visible chains, yet it's possible that inwardly each of us walks with a hobble the other side might recognize. For we are writers.

Handshakes then, all down the line. Wheeling round, I finish by shaking the hand of the dowager who has served us. On a few faces do I catch a post-Hapsburg smile? She's a servant, then—or what used to be called one. In these Socialist-Democratic countries then, where manners are still so formal—where you must hang your coat in the garde-robe or a restaurant won't serve you, or an armed museum-attendant will send you back—you still do not shake hands with her.

But I feel I'm right. She might be one of those sixty thousand. She is the populace. And she wears the hat.

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The legacy of Robert Lowell

by Donald Petersen

In these days of voyeurism and the pursuit of vicarious kicks Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell: a Biography*[1] is bound to be a much-thumbed book. Because the poet himself made a public record of his private life—mess after mess after mess detailed in the later poems—scholars will be at work for a long time, not only with the incidental felicities of phrase but with the questions of the poems' "truths": to what extent does this or that passage reflect or falsify the poet's life, especially his amorous relationships. Here are possibilities for endless gossip, endless soap opera. It is easy to predict that the Lowell biography machine will keep going well into the next century, with Mr. Hamilton's thick, well-documented biography as a primary text.

Lowell himself practically ordained this by living the sort of life that he did and by writing it into his poems. It was as though, sensing our fondness for gossip, our penchant for meanness, he deliberately left us, in those late "confessional" books, poems in which biographical matters—the agonies of the heart and the mind—greatly outweigh any literary merit. Indeed, during the last twenty years of his life he stepped up his amorous activities and complicated his marital difficulties, recording them in poem after poem, almost with the design of titillating and confounding us. He has left us his literary legacy, and it is a can of worms. How we deal with it will be a fair reflection on us.

Not that any of this was easy. Mr. Hamilton is at pains to show us—year by year, month by month, almost *day by day*—the stew and sweat of Lowell's life. The presentation is mainly chronological. The documentation is plentiful, employing poems, letters, news clippings, critical works, unpublished memoirs and manuscripts (especially from the Lowell collection in the Harvard library), and many personal interviews between Hamilton and Lowell's heirs and friends. He also tells us how Lowell, always a worrier of his poems, went through a fever of composition and revision. Even in the books of the Seventies—*Notebook, History, For Lizzie and Harriet, The Dolphin*, and *Day by Day*—though the poems may have the look of casual construction, little more than diary entries or snippets of letters conveying hot-off-the-griddle experience dumped still steaming into unrhymed "sonnets" or free-verse stanzas, the casual look, we are told, is deceiving. Often the poet's labors are augmented by the helpful hand of his friend, the poet Frank Bidart. The revision of a line might produce a reversal of its meaning, for the effect sometimes outweighed the truth. And, in any case, the truth of poetry may be above mere biographical facts. No wonder, then, that some of Lowell's heirs and friends, through Hamilton's doggedly heroic recital of his life, wish to disclose the straight unsentimentalized facts. But this is not all they

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wish. For by and large, Mr. Hamilton, an English poet and critic, also has a fine sense of Lowell's poems. Again and again in this Byzantine book he returns to the poems. Though his judgments will be challenged, he does not forget that Lowell's chief importance to us is as a poet who wrote some poems that will stand.

Not that the poet was very often at the peak of his powers. This is the tale of a poet who was, for all of his adult life, a mental patient. As often as two or three times a year he had recourse to psychiatric hospitals, often locked wards, where in the beginning he underwent shock therapy and, later, treatment by drugs. It is also the tale of his three marriages—to Jean Stafford from 1940 to 1948, to Elizabeth Hardwick from 1949 to 1972, and to Caroline Blackwood, of Britain's Guinness family, from 1972 until his death in 1977. Each of these marriages was literary, each wife a writer possessed of keen insight and a fine literary style. Two of the marriages were enhanced and further complicated by the birth of children. With Hardwick he fathered a daughter and, with Blackwood, a son. One might say, following Mr. Hamilton, that these wives companioned him as well as they could as he journeyed through his manic-depressive Scylla and Charybdis, lured by many a dewy-eyed siren. But principally this is the tale of his marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick, who lived with him, learned from him, and bore the brunt of caring for him for the longest time, while carrying on her own career as a novelist and essayist. To her Mr. Hamilton's book is largely indebted. And finally, most tellingly and most terribly, this is the tale of Thorazine, the drug that alternately sustained and depressed him from 1954 to 1967, and the tale of lithium, the drug that then took him over and released him into being the neo-Roman poet that a piece of him wanted to be.

The present life also gives us a detailed account of Lowell's early years, his home, and upbringing. Here is the domineering mother, Charlotte, a chip off her proud father Arthur Winslow, who traced his line back even farther than the Lowells could, to the Mayflower. Though she had read Napoleon's life admiringly, several of her stronger suitors were rejected, and she finally settled, with her father's approval, on the "oafish and compliant" Bob Lowell, a career navy man with a fixed oval smile and no future, his money smaller than Charlotte's, his major assets his family name and a stiff sort of bearing, like that of a wedding-cake doll. We learn of the birth of their only child, Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV ("Bobby") in Arthur Winslow's town house on Boston's Beacon Hill, in 1917. Of their subsequent homes and neighborhoods. Of the lonely boy's schools and his few chums. Of the sadomasochistic teasing, particularly with respect to his gifts, allowances, and expectations (very possibly reflecting the husband-wife interplay), that developed between Charlotte and Bobby.

He early acquired a hulking size and became a playground bully. Put into St. Mark's prep school at thirteen, he began by scrapping with the boys and was a below-average student. But in his last two years (1933-35), gradually beginning to see himself as "intellectual," he organized a self-improvement group consisting of himself, Blair Clark, and Frank Parker. He took the nickname Cal—after Caliban or Caligula—to signify either his brute or demonic nature. He dominated the group with "a brutal, childish tyranny," prescribing reading programs, rules of conduct, roles—Parker would be a painter, Clark a musician or philosopher, himself a poet. For the summer of 1935, a trip to Nantucket was planned. In a cottage he had rented, while reading Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Amy Lowell's *Keats,* Lowell prescribed for his group a daily diet including cereal with raw honey, cooked eels, and cocoa. On one occasion they mixed rum with cocoa, for "experience required the trio to know what it felt like to be drunk." Parker and Clark remained Lowell's lifelong friends, Parker was to make prints for jackets and frontispieces of Lowell's books, and Clark was very often the good

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angel who assisted during Lowell's many mental breakdowns and convalescences. Clark remembers Cal's mother (in an interview with Ian Hamilton—this book is a treasure trove of such interviews): "She was very uncomfortable about him—he was so clumsy, so sloppy, so ill-mannered. She would say things like 'See what nice manners Blair has.' . . . I really think there was a psychological fixation on dominating Cal by that woman. And what does an only child do—with an obsessed mother and a weak father who goes along with that obsession?"

At St. Mark's he studies with Richard Eberhart, and writes his first stumbling poems. In his senior year he writes an essay: "War: A Justification." While admitting the depravity of war, he maintains that in peacetime there is a "spirit of listlessness and decay." War "radiates life, energy, and enthusiasm," unity and a spirit of cooperation. His parents have destined him for Harvard, where cousin A. Lawrence Lowell is president. His courses leave him numb, he feels snubbed by the student literati. Robert Frost, the Norton Lecturer that year, belittles a poem on the Crusades that he is trying to write. He threatens to drop out. To which Charlotte responds: ". . . if you choose to be independent you must also be responsible and self-supporting . . . . we will not help you to do things of which we do *not* approve." These strictures also extend to Bobby's wish to become engaged to a Boston debutante, Anne Tuckerman Dick. The senior Lowell ineptly intervenes with Anne's father, writing of alleged improprieties on her part. Anne shows Mr. Lowell's note to Bobby, who instructs her to drive him to Marlborough Street and then wait in the car. He enters his home, hands the note back to his father, strikes him down, and storms out leaving his father "half prostrate on the floor." Charlotte contacts Merrill Moore, the Boston psychiatrist-poet with whom she seems to have had a long relationship. (She had been in his care and, at the very least, was for some time later in his part-time employ.) Moore suggests that his friend Allen Tate, at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, might be willing to receive Bobby, thus distancing him from both his parents and Anne Dick.

Bedeviled by his parents ever since birth—this is how it often must have seemed. And he had bedeviled them back, again and again, until he got what he wanted. But it was more than getting what he wanted: we learn *that* in the cradle, crying to be fed, in school and on the playground, jostling for our place. It was a matter of getting everything to work in his favor. If he pushed his case hard enough, if he got really mad, he found that people could be good, and that the world just might go his way. Now there was a new factor, the solicitousness of a Merrill Moore, who knew his home situation and could also connect him with "real writers." Here he was, traveling south with Moore, "my head full of Miltonic, vaguely piratical ambitions. My only anchor was a suitcase, heavy with bad poetry. I was brought to earth by my bumper mashing the Tates' frail agrarian mailbox post." For the first time, if he could only manage to *be* a poet, he would see what doors would open to his poetic rages. What friends, what loves would venture to his service now?

Thus he meets Allen Tate and becomes, for a while, a precocious if exhausting member of the Tate household. Thus he meets John Crowe Ransom, and sits in on Ransom's classes. In the autumn he will follow Ransom to Kenyon College in Ohio, where Ransom will become chairman of the English Department. But now, July 1937, he is riding with the Tates in a car to Olivet College in Michigan, to a writers' conference. He listens admiringly to lectures by Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Anne Porter, and Tate, and he gets to show around his poems, to a good response. From Olivet he follows Ford to the University of Colorado at Boulder, to a writers' conference featuring Ford, John Peale Bishop, Sherwood Anderson, and Ransom. He meets Jean Stafford, who has taken a master's degree there and is helping the college welcome conference visitors. Though yet unpublished, she is busily

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writing fiction. She has spent two years at a German university, is witty and attractive, and knows "the latest on Auden and Isherwood." Jean promises to write him when he returns to Kenyon in the fall.

Through the years Lowell would say that Tate was the chief literary influence on him, though the influence abated noticeably with the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959. (Lowell had by then turned to other models, specifically to William Carlos Williams and Elizabeth Bishop, in writing that book.) Tate, with his novelist wife Caroline Gordon, presented Lowell with an example of a literary marriage, displaying the intensity, wit, critical intelligence, and informed background that Lowell found lacking in his parents. And Gordon's devout Roman Catholicism provided counterbalance to the Lowell family's unquestioning religion. Tate continually entertained Catholic ideas but did not convert till 1950. Jean Stafford had converted a few years before Lowell met her.

At Kenyon Lowell's closest friends are Randall Jarrell, Peter Taylor, Robie Macauley, and John Thompson. He reads classics with Frederick Santee. In the spring of 1940 he marries Jean Stafford despite parental opposition, and graduates from Kenyon "summa cum laude, phi beta kappa, first man in my class, and valedictorian." He accepts a junior fellowship at Louisiana State University, to study with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. He writes to his parents, "I am not flattered by the remark that you do not know where I am heading or that my ways are not your ways. I am heading exactly where I have been heading for six years. One can hardly be ostracized for taking the intellect and aristocracy and family tradition seriously." His parents think he is up to writing a little poetry, and doubt that this will allow him to support a wife. He does not tell them how thoroughly he intends to augment, revamp, and exploit "the family tradition."

In Louisiana he becomes Roman Catholic and remarries Jean in a Catholic church. After this point, Jean later claimed, they never slept together. Jean's "light-hearted" Catholicism does not suit Cal. She begins to drink and smoke heavily. They quarrel. In a violent moment he breaks her nose and tries to strangle her. In September 1941 they are in New York where Lowell has a job as copy editor with the Catholic publishers Sheed and Ward. In the winter of 1942 they are back in Tennessee with the Tates, where Lowell writes all of the poems in *Land of Unlikeness,* to be published in 1944. In these poems, says Hamilton,

> there is a high fever, a driven, almost deranged, belligerence in both the voice and vocabulary, as if poems had become hurled thunderbolts, instruments of grisly retribution . . . . They are unreachable, irresponsibly obscure much of the time; they flail around in a perplexing mix of local, mythological, and Catholic reference. But what marks them is a blind faith in their own headlong momentum.

Ten of these poems, slightly revised, and thirty new poems, will go into the next book *Lord Weary's Castle. Land of Unlikeness* draws, despite its limited edition, thoughtful notice from reviewers Arthur Mizener and John Frederick Nims, and a demurrer from R. P. Blackmur: "Lowell is distraught about religion . . . . What is thought of as Boston in him fights what is thought of as Catholic; and the fight produces not a tension but a gritting."

On September 7, 1943, Lowell writes President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Dear Mr. President: I very much regret that I must refuse the opportunity you offer me in your communication of August 6, 1943, for service in the Armed Forces." In an attached statement he cites "the razing of Hamburg, where 200,000 non-combatants are reported dead, after an almost apocalyptic series of all-out air-raids. This, in a world still nominally Christian, is *news.*" He had registered for the draft and, during the previous year, had tried to enlist. Now the looming issue is the Allies' planned "permanent destruction of Germany and Japan." He is well versed in the modern war poets, Owen and Sassoon and the rest, and in the carnage of

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1918. Now, in this new war, the prospect is even more awful.

Again there is by-play with his family; he lets them know that before taking action he consulted with his priest. His mother says to the press, "I really think that it was a question of poetic temperament." He is sentenced to a year and a day in the Danbury (Connecticut) prison, and paroled after four months. For his parole sentence he works as a cleaner in the nurses' quarters of Bridgeport's St. Vincent's Hospital. Jean finds an apartment for them at nearby Black Rock. From a back window they have a view of low-tide mud-flats rimmed by a putrid city dump; from the front steps they can see the spires of St. Stephen's. It is the setting of the justly praised "Colloquy in Black Rock." The final stanza:

> Christ walks on the black water. In Black Mud
> Darts the kingfisher. On Corpus Christi,
> heart,
> Over the drum-beat of St. Stephen's choir
> I hear him, *Stupor Mundi,* and the mud
> Flies from his hunching wings and beak—my
> heart,
> The blue kingfisher dives on you in fire.

The lines are packed with Anglo-Saxon monosyllables and hovering accents. The main influence on the line is probably Hart Crane, whose poetry Tate had introduced him to. The imagery and the hyped-up tone are affected by Hopkins, who had passed on the same to Dylan Thomas. (At this point Lowell regarded Thomas as a major competitor.) But who can object to "influences" when they are so strikingly used to write a whole poem powerfully expressing the poet's low circumstances, his manic highs, and the triumph attainable within form? As well object to Auden's use of Yeats, or Vaughan's use of Donne. There has been a whole lot of cant in recent years about the poet's need to "find his own voice." Such a concern, if primary, rarely leads to a grand style. "Colloquy in Black Rock" triumphs by its use of poetic tradition. Bach did not ignore Vivaldi when he wrote a concerto nor did he forget Buxtehude when he sat to his keyboard.

Much has been made of Lowell's conversion to Roman Catholicism. Some have thought it a relatively brief affair—after all, didn't he renounce the church when he divorced Jean Stafford in 1948? But Lowell's background was Episcopalian, and therefore in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. The first R. T. S. Lowell was an Episcopalian clergyman. Lowell's sojourn with Roman Catholicism was a means of offending his family, working free of family tradition and gaining some objectivity toward it, and intensifying his awareness of the Catholicism within Episcopalianism. He was keenly aware of T. S. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, and the part it had played in Eliot's poetry. While it is true that Lowell's religious zeal noticeably waned, his conscientious objection in 1943 prefigures his activism against Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War policies in the 1960s: his famous letter refusing to attend a White House arts banquet, 1967; his part in the Washington demonstrations, 1967 (see Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*); and his campaigning for Senator Eugene McCarthy for president, 1968. Years before, Jean Stafford had complained that "after the war what Cal wants to do is to be a sort of soapbox preacher with an organization called the Catholic Evidence Guilds which operate in city parks, etc., preach and answer the posers of hecklers . . . . When I inquire of him how we will live, . . . he says that God will take care of us, that one cannot be a wage slave." Lowell's activism is part of his vatic role, fulfilling the function of religious practice. And coupled with this role is constantly the suggestion of martyrdom. As years go by, as he sees his friends Jarrell, Schwartz, and Berryman fall to insufferable illness and suicide, he entertains the notion that his generation of poets is cursed and that the role of the poet might be to undergo some sort of self-immolation or martyrdom, suffering all, so that others might be cautioned and perhaps saved.

During the summer of 1945, with proceeds from her highly successful novel *Bos-*

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ton Adventure, Jean buys them a "large and grandly Hellenic" house at Damariscotta Mills in Maine. It will be the setting of Lowell's "The Mills of the Kavanaughs." *Boston Adventure* is about the snobbish milieu of Bob Lowell and his wife, whom Stafford now thinks of as "Charlotte Vicious." The senior Lowells frown on the novel's content while admiring the money it makes. They take the occasion to remind Bobby of his inadequacy. Jean writes to a friend, "My inimitable mother-in-law . . . said to Cal that his poetry was nice but valueless since 'one must please the many, not the few.'"

In October 1945 Lowell sent the manuscript of *Lord Weary's Castle* to Randall Jarrell, who replied: "You write more in the great tradition, the grand style, the real middle of English poetry, than anybody since Yeats." Here are ten of Lowell's very highest achievements, written in a white heat over three years: "Colloquy in Black Rock," "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," "Between the Porch and the Altar," "As a Plane Tree by the Water," "At the Indian Killer's Grave," "Mr. Edwards and the Spider," "After the Surprising Conversions," "The Death of the Sheriff" (Part I), and "Where the Rainbow Ends."

These poems show that he has an inexhaustible subject—being a Winslow-Lowell—that extends far back beyond his own life to pre-Revolutionary America. And not just the privilege, he has the difficulty of being of this line. In his own life the only child of muddled heirs, when he traced his ancestry he found that some of his storied forebears were vicious. Such was Edward Winslow, a founder of Plymouth Colony and oppressor of the Indians, along with his brother John, named in Lowell's poem. Such was Edward's son Josiah Winslow, governor of the colony and the worst of the Indian-killing ancestors. In 1676, as commander of the united New England forces, he killed the Indian leader King Philip and massacred whole villages of his followers. King Philip's head was hacked off and mounted on a paling in public view, where it remained for a quarter-century. The poem recalls it in a passage that resonates with St. Peter's speech in Milton's "Lycidas."

> Philip's head
> Grins on the platter, fouls in pantomime
> The fingers of kept time:
> "Surely, this people is but grass,"
> He whispers, "this will pass;
> But, Sirs, the trollop dances on your skulls
> And breaks the hollow noddle like an egg
> That thought the world an eggshell. Sirs, the gulls
> Scream from the squelching wharf-piles, beg a leg
> To crack their crops. The Judgment is at hand;
> Only the dead are poorer in this world
> Where State and elders thundered *raca,* hurled
> Anathemas at nature and the land
> That fed the hunter's gashed and green perfection—
> Its settled mass concedes no outlets for your puns
> And verbal Paradises. Your election,
> Hawking above this slime
> For souls as single as their skeletons,
> Flutters and claws in the dead hand of time."

Here are the hard-driving rhythms stretched over the metrical frame; the surprising line-lengths, caesuras and enjambments, the crisp rhymes, the Anglo-Saxon monosyllables wedged among the Latinate polysyllables, the images that dazzle and stun. What a tough and varied set of textures. What a piece of stitching and weaving. The poem has begun with the poet visiting King's Chapel and the graves of his forebears. Here is all this awful history in the midst of the contemporary urban tawdriness. He descends to the crypts where he ponders on his blood-stained ancestor whom he casts in the image of Cadmus:

> Who was the man who sowed the dragon's teeth,
> That fabulous or fancied patriarch
> Who sowed so ill for his descent, beneath
> King's Chapel in this underworld and dark?

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The poem closes with the prayer that he be allowed to transcend this garden of the dead and come "Where Mary twists the warlock with her flowers— / Her soul a bridal chamber fresh with flowers / And her whole body an ecstatic womb, / As through the trellis peers the sudden Bridegroom." Thus the conclusion of the poem is Catholic and surprisingly sexual in its vision of mystical union.

Allen Tate thought that Lowell's best poetry was a result of his conversion to Rome in 1941. He also thought that when Lowell's poetry began to weaken it was the result of his loss of faith. But the impulse behind some of the strongest poems in *Lord Weary's Castle* is not specifically Catholic. It is Miltonic. Behind "To Arthur Winslow" and "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket" and "At the Indian Killer's Grave" stands the shadowy eminence of "Lycidas." Additionally, "At the Indian Killer's Grave" shares some of the passion and stylistic rigor of Milton's sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont."

> Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints whose bones
> Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold . . .
> Slain by the bloody Piemontese that rolled
> Mother with infant down the rocks.

Lowell's conversion to Rome was a late step in his rebellion against his parents, against his Winslow-Lowell ancestry, and against the righteous Protestantism that destroyed King Philip's nation. The fact that he is a Winslow-Lowell is crucial to the poem. The poem is autobiographical in the best sense, relying on a convergence of personal conscience and family tradition with a significant trouble in history—a trouble that will not go away. That the poem's tone and devices and grand style were first practiced by Milton is no more objectionable than Wordsworth's use of Miltonics in *his* major poetry. And those who think there is a great disparity between Puritanism and orthodoxy would do well to re-read Book III of *Paradise Lost*. Lowell, like Browning, Wordsworth, and Milton, was moved far more by literary tradition than he was by faith, which is to say that they were all users, not followers, of religion.

Ian Hamilton discusses some of the lesser poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*. Among these is "Rebellion," based on the skirmish between Lowell and his father.

> There was rebellion, father, when the mock
> French windows slammed and you hove backward, rammed
> Into your heirlooms, screens, a glass-cased clock,
> The highboy quaking to its toes. You damned
> My arm that cast your house upon your head
> And broke the chimney flintlock on your skull.
> Last night the moon was full:
> I dreamed the dead
> Caught at my knees and fell:
> And it was well
> With me, my father. Then
> Behemoth and Leviathan
> Devoured our mighty merchants. None could arm
> Or put to sea. O father, on my farm
> I added field to field
> And I have sealed
> An everlasting pact
> With Dives to contract
> The world that spreads in pain;
> But the world spread
> When the clubbed flintlock broke my father's brain.

Hamilton admires the factuality of the first eleven lines, but says that thereafter "the poem deteriorates into myth and melodrama." The imaginative rendering of detail, "You damned / My arm that cast your house upon your head," gives a skewed and dizzying effect. The house is also the family house, or lineage. The poem then moves into a dream of retribution and apocalypse. The persona fortifies himself in a good Yankee way by building up his domain "field to field," presumably by mortgage, by an "everlasting" pact with Dives. The larger his freehold, he fancies, the smaller his pain.

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Myth and melodrama are here, to be sure. Hamilton suggests that the poem would be better if it hewed to factuality. He may be assuming what apologists for Lowell's later poems have assumed, namely that the closer the poet stays to his personal life the better, that he somehow had a "talent" for autobiography.

Such an assumption robs a writer of the freedom to create. It is nonsense. If widely applied it would invalidate much of the world's poetry and fiction. To take the case at hand, "Lycidas," the only biographical fact is mentioned in the epigraph—that Milton's friend, the young clergyman Edward King, was drowned in a shipwreck while crossing the Irish Sea. The rest of this grand piece of humanism is an imaginative construction in the spirit and tradition and partially in the style of the *Astrophel* collection of elegies for Sir Philip Sidney, gathered by Spenser in 1595. Now, whether we observe the mythologizing spirit at work in a short poem such as Lowell's "Rebellion," or in a greater poem such as "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," the issue is the same: the poet's right to tap into the tradition to obtain the resonances he seeks. We do not think less of Milton for doing this any more than we belittle Mahler for his debt to Bruckner and Wagner. And we honor Lowell for having written a dozen major poems in the great tradition.

Lowell and Jean Stafford begin to drift apart. They separate in 1946, though the divorce is not final until 1948. Lowell eases out of the marriage by having affairs with a *Partisan Review* book critic and a Washington socialite. In April 1947 he wins the Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters award. "In the space of a few months," says Hamilton, "he had become unmarried, non-Catholic, the most promising young poet in America, and perhaps the first World War II CO to be offered a job in the government." The job is Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. He uses this position to bring his friends to Washington to visit, and to make acquaintance with Ezra Pound, in St. Elizabeth's Hospital. During this time he tells several of his friends that he is going to marry Elizabeth Bishop, although she has made it clear that she will not marry any man.

Toward the end of 1948 he is at Yaddo, the artists' colony at Saratoga Springs, New York, where he meets Elizabeth Hardwick. She leaves for Christmas but returns for a couple of months. It is January 1949. "I suppose he had the beginning of his breakdown there. But I didn't know him well enough to know. It takes a lot of experience. And he was a very gripping sort of character." Thus Hardwick, to Ian Hamilton. Lowell becomes convinced that the director of Yaddo, Elizabeth Ames, is not only an arch-liberal but that she presides over a hotbed of Communism. He writes letters to the Yaddo directors, enlists aid of friends, and succeeds in shaking the institution severely before the Yaddo directors reject his charges and reaffirm their full support of Mrs. Ames. "Yaddo was left like a stricken battlefield," said board member Malcolm Cowley. During this time Robert Fitzgerald is Lowell's sympathetic companion in the Catholic faith. What a year 1949 is. Lowell never slows up.

There is much more to come. Now he is in Rhode Island among the Trappists, now he is back in New York seeing Hardwick, now he is planning a trip to visit Tate at Chicago, Peter Taylor at Bloomington, Ransom at Kenyon. He arrives at the Tates' in a highly distraught state. "Cal is here, and in 24 hours he has flattened us out." Lowell is doing his "bear" impersonations—his favorite joke-bear is an imaginary Boston Irish policeman named "Arms of the Law." He lifts Tate over his head and holds him out the second-story apartment window while giving "a bear's voice recitation" of Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." They take him to a restaurant where he makes a scene, and when they get him home he opens a window and shouts profanity and obscenity until four policemen appear and, after ten minutes, subdue and handcuff him.

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Finally, with the help of J.V. Cunningham, Tate gets the police to release Lowell into the care of a psychiatrist. Tate sends him off on the train to Bloomington, phoning Taylor to warn him of Lowell's state. In Bloomington he runs wild. In his unpublished drafts for *Life Studies* he writes:

> The night before I was locked up I ran about the streets of Bloomington Indiana crying out against devils and homosexuals . . . . I suspected I was a reincarnation of the Holy Ghost. To have known the glory, violence and banality of such an experience is corrupting.

Charlotte Lowell, Merrill Moore, and John Thompson arrive and succeed in getting him back to New York, "foaming at the mouth," and then to a padded cell in a hospital in Massachusetts. On leaving the hospital he goes to New York to see Elizabeth Hardwick. On July 28, 1949 he marries her in his parents' home. When they come back from their honeymoon along the Hudson it is agreed that Lowell will seek psychiatric care. This is the first of his many stays in the Payne Whitney Clinic in New York.

In 1950 there is his first teaching stint at the University of Iowa and one at the Kenyon School of English. In August his father dies, earning a poignant notice in the draft autobiography. Now they are off to Italy. Lowell is writing *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* and visiting George Santayana regularly. Charlotte Lowell arrives for a visit. "Sheer torture," Hardwick reflects. She and Lowell end up in Amsterdam, "not the land of tulips but the land of drudgery," but she notes that her husband is "calming down."

Ian Hamilton's penetrating analysis of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* is one of the best discussions available of this book, though one may disagree with his final estimate of its worth. The monologues and verse-novels of Browning provide the book's major stylistic models. The Browning influence has already shown itself in *Lord Weary*'s triumphant "After the Surprising Conversions." The tone of the book is edgy, high-pitched, at times hysterical, reflecting the author's manic states. Reviewers were baffled by its magnific energies as scary as those of a black hole. Almost all, following Randall Jarrell's lead, singled out "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid" and "Mother Marie Therese" as two of Lowell's most consummate poems. And almost all echoed Jarrell's complaint about the book's long title poem:

> "The Mills of the Kavanaughs" does not seem to me successful as a unified work of art, a narrative poem that makes the same kind of sense a novel or a story makes. It is too much a succession of nightmares and daydreams that are half-nightmare . . . . there is a sort of monotonous violence and extremity about the poem, as if it were a piece of music that consisted of nothing but climaxes. The people too often seem to be acting *in the manner of* Robert Lowell, rather than plausibly . . . .

Jarrell along with Allen Tate had urged Lowell to turn to narrative writing. Now reviewer after reviewer was treating his major effort as a spectacular failure. And worst of all, there was William Carlos Williams in the *Times* complaining about "the rhyme track" and "the formal fixation of the line . . . . Mr. Lowell appears to be restrained by the lines; he appears to *want* to break out of them."

Hamilton says that the book is "a clamor of distraught, near-hysterical first-person speech . . . almost always the speaker is a woman." Because of his access to Lowell's correspondence he is able to show that the suicided wife in "Thanksgiving's Over" reflects the anguish in the 1947 letters of Jean Stafford. The central character in "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," Anne Kavanaugh, is also based on a woman in Stafford's short story, "A Country Love Story," in which a bored wife invents an imaginary lover. Moreover,

> In life, Lowell was susceptible to rumor about Jean's amorous fancies: there is evidence in letters that he was at various times led to believe she was interested in one or another of his friends, and that violent quarrels could result

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> from these suspicions. With these two elements in mind—her restlessness, his jealousy—the central scene of "The Mills of the Kavanaughs" can easily be read as a parable of his marriage to Jean Stafford. In it, Anne Kavanaugh is in bed with her husband and dreams that she is being seduced by a young boy. Harry wakes and hears her speaking to her imaginary lover, attacks her in a jealous rage and then, in remorse, tries to destroy himself . . . .

Harry has tried to strangle her, and she has threatened to "shout it from the housetops of the Mills" that her patrician husband has tried to kill her "for dreaming." Later she comes upon Harry in the kitchen, after he has turned on the gas jets. Anne, in her reverie, recalls it thus, in one of the poem's ringing sixteen-line stanzas:

> "Spread-eagled backward on your backless chair,
> Inhaling the regardless, whirling air,
> Rustling about you from the oven jets,
> Sparkling and crackling on the cigarettes
> Still burning in the saucer, where you'd tossed
> Almost a carton, Love, before you lost
> All sense of caring, and I saw your eyes
> Looking in wonder at your bloody hand—
> And like an angler wading out from land,
> Who feels the bottom shelving, while he sees
> His nibbled bobber twitch the dragonflies:
> You watched your hand withdrawing by degrees—
> Enthralled and fearful—till it stopped beneath
> Your collar, and you felt your being drip
> Blue-purple with a joy that made your teeth
> Grin all to-whichways through your lower lip."

Plenty of Lowellian enthusiasm—the "old hilarity"—here. No poet is his equal at this kind of thing. This passage is not *about* madness, as some of his later poetry is. It is a pure presentation of madness, wholly objectified. There is nothing in Lowell's later poetry that can stand comparison with this. (We will have to look in his unpublished prose autobiography to find its like.) To be sure, his influences are showing: heroic simile, a rhymed and clotted tangle worse than Browning's "Sordello," and a bit of Frost's witch poems. We know, from discussion with Lowell, that certain Victorian poems were strong for him. He was keenly aware of George Meredith's febrile "Modern Love," a sequence of sixteen-line "sonnets" revealing the collapse of Meredith's marriage by the intervention of another woman. Did Lowell also know Browning's "Pauline; a Fragment of a Confession," an amorous recollection in blank verse? A next step for Lowell might have been narrative in blank verse, but very possibly he thought that Frost had that territory all staked out.

Despite his appreciative incursion into *The Mills,* Hamilton is inclined to go along with its detractors. He terms it a "confused, self-punishing, bleakly secular performance—and a crucial one in Lowell's development." This makes a major assumption about Lowell's "development." Another critic, Steven Gould Axelrod, writes:

> This slim volume contains seven poems. Five of them are stunning failures. The problem with *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* is that Lowell mistook his gift and obsession to be fiction when it in fact was autobiography.

Another critic, John R. Reed, said of Lowell's later poetry:

> He [Lowell] no longer requires an Anne Kavanaugh, a Michael, or an old man drowsing over his Vergil. Now, when he wishes to convey another view of experience, he can do so openly, with his own voice.

And Ian Hamilton writes:

> In his first three books autobiography had been oblique, almost clandestine; now he was free to be both distorting and direct. It never seems to have occurred to him that his personal history might not be of considerable public interest.

Simple, no? If we can believe these writers,

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The Mills is a failure because Lowell's real "talent" lay with autobiography. Is this some kind of joke? In *The Mills,* like most good fiction writers, he uses his personally observed experience as a basis for developing characters and events. The same fiction-making impulse underlies *Lord Weary*'s "The Death of the Sheriff" and "Between the Porch and the Altar," among Lowell's strongest poems. In writing these fictions Lowell knew, what all three of his gifted wives knew, that although fiction may begin with autobiography, it has a way of outstripping it and rising to a much greater truth than what it started from. To complain, then, that *The Mills* is an imperfect assimilation of his life events, a fictive mish-mash, because his "real" talent was autobiography, is to hugely beg the question. Were Tate and Jarrell wrong when they urged him to venture into fiction? Some of his greatest achievements—at least five of his dozen best poems—are in this genre. How much better would Lowell's poetry have been if he had been able to keep on in this direction? Of all the speculations about Lowell's career after *The Mills,* this raises by far the most interesting possibility. For Lowell's real problem was two fold: his deteriorating health, now largely brought to light by Ian Hamilton, and the problem of language, diction in particular. He could not achieve the transparency of language that Tate had vaunted in Dante, that Lowell and his friend Delmore Schwartz had envied in Tolstoy, and that he and Jarrell had admired in Frost and Williams.

For 1951 and 1952 the Lowells remain in Europe. In 1952 he teaches at the Seminar in American Studies at Salzburg, and undergoes another of his cyclic speed-ups, this time involving a young Italian woman, a music student. Again he must enter a psychiatric hospital. In 1953 he arrives at the University of Iowa for his second and last teaching stint there.

We knew him then, briefly. Paul Engle, the director of the Poetry Workshop, had taken the term off, and Lowell was hired to replace him. Lowell arrived alone—Hardwick was soon to follow—and we learned that the man who had written those poems was also likeable. Batching it briefly, he came to our place for dinner a couple of times. One night, when we were again planning to have asparagus, my wife asked him if he liked asparagus and his eyes glinted with glee behind his thick glasses, his right hand led by the index finger began its customary twirling as if he were about to launch into a sonnet by Nerval. "There aren't very many things better than asparagus," he said with a softly imploded breath of a chuckle. And we knew it was so. Donald Justice and his wife Jean were also present. We spent the evening ranging over Baudelaire, French food, Pope, George Eliot, Iowa football and basketball. (Roy Campbell had come through and pronounced an Iowa football game "better than a bullfoight.") Cal asked us if we knew of his wife's writing and told us that she had been at work for two years on the love-nest asphyxiation of an Iowa coed.

Tall, slim, with bushy dark hair, he walked erectly but on the balls of his feet, his large-jawed head thrust slightly forward. This possibly had something to do with his eyesight. Soft-spoken but definite in his utterance, with a lightly Southern, high-Virginia accent, he praised what he could in our poems and diffidently suggested that we consult other poets' works, to see how it was done this or that way. He seldom suggested any specific revisions. We saw him as a still-young poet who had crafted some thickly textured poems that were likely bets for the anthologies. We did not see him, then, as a celebrity.

When Elizabeth Hardwick arrived we saw a slim, dark-haired, warmly attractive woman, well-read and witty. There was a new dimension in the conversations—manners and morals and character. One night we were at the Lowells' with another student and his wife. The other wife, still childless, made bold to compliment Elizabeth on forgoing parenthood in favor of a literary marriage. For a brief minute or two the Hardwick tongue replied that we all have a

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purpose and need to procreate and that there is nothing so pathetic as an old married couple "doddering about with nothing to show for their pains." This was good news to my wife who was pregnant with our first child.

Another night we were having a birthday party for one friend or other—in those days at Iowa almost any pretext for a party would suffice. After a duck dinner we fell to playing charades. The fiction-writer Thomas Rogers was present, and Cal gave him this line to act out, from Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel": "*Og* from a Treason Tavern rowling home." Tom worked feverishly at this, but after about ten minutes had to give up. Thus did his long string of parlor-game victories come to an end, and thus did Lowell amaze and confound the graduates.

Lowell was a voracious reader. He would attack a book with a savage ferocity. Poems in English were no match for him; he attacked poems in Greek, Latin, French, German, Spanish, and Italian. He confessed that he had no Russian, but one felt that this was a temporary disability. Though he was fond of Frost's poetry he was vehement in rejecting Robinson's; Frost's clear lines were crisp, Robinson's were too often gray and flat. We were always struck by the sheer exuberance of his learning, wit, and laughter. When he talked in his quiet, definite tones about poets, novelists, critics, and their styles, he was tender about them, positively conspiratorial, with us caught up in his schemes. Among his students was W. D. Snodgrass; it is entirely true that the drafts of Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle" awakened Lowell's interest in confessional (or as Snodgrass called it, domestic) poetry. If only he had retained Snodgrass's clarity of diction and reference, and his formal strength; he took Snodgrass's chaff, and threw away the wheat.

To resume the narrative, the year 1954 was simply awful for the Lowells. They are at the University of Cincinnati, where he has the Chair of Poetry from January to June. The job is a demanding one, requiring forum lectures. "The prospect makes me feel squint-eyed, homemade, and illiterate." Meanwhile, Charlotte Lowell goes off on a hare-brained jaunt through Italy and dies of a stroke at Rapallo on February 14. Lowell takes a month off from the Cincinnati job and flies to Italy to accompany the body back for burial in the Winslow family grave plot in Dunbarton, New Hampshire. Lowell's draft autobiography in the Harvard library (written during 1955-1957, but unpublished) contains some affecting passages on his mother's death. In Italy for a week, he takes the occasion to renew acquaintance with an Italian woman, the music student he had met at Salzburg two years before. Though she is now married to an Italian, she and Lowell are drawn to each other, and they find time and occasion to start up an affair.

Back in New York, where Elizabeth Hardwick has stayed for this interval, he announces that their marriage is finished, that he will go off and seek a new life. One of Hardwick's responses is amusement, another is relief ("It is like coming out of a cave to be free of this"), and another is the observation that Cal is "in an elation which is brought about by guilt feelings over his relief, quite unexpected, at his mother's death, guilt feelings complicated by his profiting from his mother's death." His income has about doubled and he will receive "some fifty thousand dollars in cash." Lowell returns to Cincinnati, gives lectures on Pound and Frost, but by the time he gives his infamous final lecture on Hitler, "more or less extolling the superhuman ideology," the Cincinnati literati begin to think that there is something wrong with him. Hardwick arrives, with John Thompson, and on April 8 they obtain a court order to commit him to a Cincinnati hospital, where he undergoes several weeks of shock therapy.

The worst is yet to come. By June of 1954 he seems "well enough to be moved" to the Payne Whitney Clinic in New York City. The diagnosis is now "leaning toward acute schizophrenia." He is taken off shock treatment and put on a new drug, Thorazine. He

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still wants to fly off to the Italian woman whom he scarcely knows. This must have been one of the most terrible periods of his life. Lowell's draft autobiography, extensively supplied to us by Hamilton, runs thus:

> When Mother died, I began to feel tireless, madly sanguine, menaced, and menacing. I entered the Payne-Whitney Clinic for "all those afflicted in mind." One night I sat in the mixed lounge, and enjoyed the new calm which I had been acquiring with much cunning during the few days since my entrance. I remember coining and pondering for several minutes such phrases as the Art of Detachment, Off-handed Involvement, and Urbanity: a Key to the Tactics of Self-control. But the old menacing hilarity was growing in me. I saw Anna and her nurse walk into our lounge. Anna, a patient from a floor for more extreme cases, was visiting our floor for the evening. I knew that the evening would soon be over, that the visitor would probably not return to us, and that I had but a short time to make my impression on her. Anna towered over the piano, and thundered snatches of Mozart sonatas, which she half-remembered and murdered. Her figure, a Russian Ballerina's or Anna Karenina's, was emphasized, and *illuminated,* as it were by an embroidered, middle-European blouse that fitted her with the creaseless, burnished, curved tightness of a medieval breast-plate. I throbbed to the music and the musician. I began to talk aimlessly and loudly to the room at large. I discussed the solution to a problem that had been bothering me about the unmanly smallness of the suits of armor that I had seen "tilting" at the Metropolitan Museum. "Don't you see?" I said, and pointed to Anna, "the armor was made for *Amazons!*" But no one took up my lead. I began to extol my tone-deafness; it was, I insisted, a providential flaw, an auditory fish-weir that screened out irrelevant sonority. I made defiant adulatory remarks on Anna's touch. Nobody paid any attention to me. Roger, an Oberlin undergraduate and fellow patient, sat beside Anna on the piano-bench. He was small. His dark hair matched his black flannel Brooks Brothers' suit; his blue-black eyes matched his blue-black necktie. He wore a light cashmere sweater that had been knitted for him by his mother, and his yellow woolen socks had been imported from the Shetlands. Roger talked to Anna with a persuasive shyness. Occasionally, he would stand up and play little beginners' pieces for her. He explained that these pieces were taken from an exercise book composed by Bela Bartok in protest against the usual, unintelligibly tasteless examples used by teachers. Anna giggled with incredulous admiration as Roger insisted that the clinic's music instructor could easily teach her to read more skilfully. Suddenly, I felt compelled to make a derisive joke, and I announced crypticly [*sic*] and untruely [*sic*] that Rubinstein had declared the eye was of course the source of all evil for a virtuoso. "If the eye offends thee, pluck it out." No one understood my humor. I grew red and confused. The air in the room began to tighten around me. I felt as if I were squatting on the bottom of a huge laboratory bottle and trying to push out the black rubber stopper before I stiffled [*sic*]. Suddenly, I knew [*corrected in E. H.'s hand to "felt"*] I could clear the air by taking hold of Roger's ankles and pulling him off his chair. By some criss-cross of logic, I reasoned that my cruel boorishness would be an act of self sacrifice. I would be bowing out of the picture, and throwing Roger into the arms of Anna. Without warning, but without lowering my eyes from Anna's splendid breast-plate-blouse, I seized Roger's yellow ankles. I pulled; Roger sat on the floor with tears in his eyes. A sign of surprised repulsion went around the room. I assumed a hurt, fatherly expression, but all at once I felt eased and sympathetic with everyone.
>
> When the head nurse came gliding into the lounge, I pretended that I was a white-gloved policeman who was directing traffic. I held up my open hands, and said, "No roughage, Madam; just innocent merriment!" Roger was getting to his feet; I made a stop-signal in his direction. In a purring, pompous James Michael Curley voice, I said, "Later, he will thank me." The head-nurse, looking bored and tolerant, led me away to watch the Liberace program in the men's television parlor. I was

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> left unpunished. But next morning, while I was weighing-in and "purifying" myself in the cold shower, I sang
>
> *Rex tremendae majestatis*
> *qui salvandos salvas gratis*
>
> at the top of my lungs and to a melody of my own devising. Like the cat-bird, who will sometimes "interrupt its sweetest song by a perfect imitation of some harsh cry such as that of the Great Crested Fly-catcher, the squawl of a hen, the cry of a lost chicken, or the spitting of a cat" I blended the lonely tenor of some fourteenth century Flemish monk to bars of Yankee Doodle, and the *Mmm Mmm* of the padlocked Papagano [*sic*].

This was written one or two years after the event. Lowell, by his own admission, was never reluctant to spruce up the details of his biography. He is also a great chameleon of styles. Behind this passage there may be something of Kafka or Dostoyevsky; so much the better. It is surely one of the most affecting pieces in all of his works. And yet he suppressed it, publishing only that portion of his draft autobiography that appeared in *Life Studies* in 1959 as "91 Revere Street." Perhaps, for Lowell, it contained too full a dose of reality, was too distilled and troubling and painful, posing a threat to his recovery. All of the pieces in *Life Studies* pale in comparison with it; thus it was also a threat to his oeuvre and his reputation. Perhaps, for Lowell, a piece of his writing could be too confessional, too naked a presentation of his wretchedness, spilling over into self-pity. Whatever his reasons for suppressing it, they are no more respectable than Kafka's wish to destroy his work. The narrative is full and convincing in its details; the hilarity is chillingly exact. And the passage goes on:

> I was then transferred to a new floor where the patients were deprived of their belts, pajama-cords and shoe-strings. We were not allowed to carry matches, and had to request the attendants to light our cigarettes. For holding up my trowsers [*sic*] I invented an inefficient, stringless method which I considered picturesque and called *Malayan*. Each morning before breakfast, I lay naked to the waist in my knotted *Malayan* pajamas and received the first of my round-the-clock injections of Chloropromzene [*sic*]: left shoulder, right shoulder, right buttock, left buttock. My blood became like melted lead. I could hardly swallow my breakfast, because I so dread the weighted bending down that would be necessary for making my bed. And the rational exigencies of bed-making were more upsetting than the physical. I wallowed through badminton doubles, as though I were a diver in the full billowings of his equipment on the bottom of the sea. I sat gaping through *Scrabble* games unable to form the simplest word; I had to be prompted by a nurse, and even then couldn't make any sense of the words the nurse had formed for me. I watched the Giants play the Brooklyn Dodgers on television.
>
> My head ached, and I couldn't keep count of the balls and strikes for longer than a single flash on the screen. I went back to my bedroom and wound the window open to its maximum six inches. Below me, patients circled in twos over the bright gray octagonal paving-stones of the courtyard. I let my glasses drop. How freely they glittered through the air for almost a minute! They shattered on the stones. Then everyone in the courtyard came crowding and thrusting their heads forward over my glasses, as though I had been scattering corn for pigeons. I felt my languor lift and then descend again. I already seemed to weigh a thousand pounds because of my drug, and now I blundered about nearly blind from myopia. But my nervous system vibrated joyfully, when I felt the cool air brushing directly on my eyeballs. And I was reborn each time I saw my blurred, now unspectacled, now unprofessorial face in the mirror.

No question, here, of style, imitation, or self-delusion. This is the confessional Lowell, the *prose* Lowell, at his best and darkest and most undiluted. This makes most of his later "confessional" work look like what it is: a collation of jottings from his note-

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books. Compare this widely praised "poetical" passage from *Life Studies*:

> After a hearty New England breakfast,
> I weigh two hundred pounds
> this morning. Cock of the walk,
> I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
> before the metal shaving mirrors,
> And see the shaky future grow familiar
> in the pinched, indigenous faces
> of these thoroughbred mental cases,
> twice my age and half my weight.
> We are all old-timers,
> each of us holds a locked razor.
>
> ("Waking in the Blue")

The attempted good humor—the deliberate clichés, the self-puffing, the false camaraderie—is meant as ironic counterpoint to the narrator's desperation. The passage is not very effective because it gives us so little of the real thing—only the metal shaving mirrors and locked razor. The effect, instead of being hair-raising or heart-aching, is glum and boring, as the lives of inmates very generally are. Still, the passage is moderately successful. But the prose account above it is exponentially better.

The other poems in Part Four of *Life Studies* run on two themes. First, Winslow-Lowell recollections, prosy poems that seem loose and easy, to say the least, as if they might better have been laid out as prose. Compare, for example, "Sailing Home from Rapallo" with Lowell's prose account of his mother's death as cited by Hamilton. The poem is not as effective even if we read it *as prose*. One of the best of these family pieces, "Dunbarton," takes a more domestic look at his grandfather Winslow. Compare it with the earlier poem on him, "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," one of Lowell's dozen strongest poems. In comparison "Dunbarton" is only a nice vignette.

The second theme is the domestic struggle, "the woe that is in marriage." (A wonderfully resonant phrase from Chaucer's Wife of Bath, it raises comic-pathetic possibilities that seem wildly inapplicable to Lowell's poem.) Those poems often serve as prosaic statements of personal record, testimonials in the confessional mode that dominates his later work. Mode, not style, for there is hardly any such thing as a confessional style, unless it is the ordinary prose of letters and diaries. The style of Lowell's later poetry will be curtailed and flattened. When it is iambic it will often tend toward woodenness and even doggerel, as in some of the Marvellian tetrameter passages of "Near the Ocean." Sometimes it will backfire with an unintended comical effect, as in the falsely jaunty movement of the last line of "Central Park":

> We beg delinquents for our life.
> Behind each bush, perhaps a knife;
> each landscaped crag, each flowering shrub,
> hides a policeman with a club.

The styles that will work best for him will be the "Americanist" style, as Hamilton calls it, of William Carlos Williams, a free-verse pastiche such as that used in "For the Union Dead," or the short-line stanza style of Elizabeth Bishop, as seen in *Life Studies*' "Skunk Hour." This poem achieves poetic effects despite its bathos: "My mind's not right." The *prose* Lowell knew better than to write a line like that. But still, "Skunk Hour," like the later "For the Union Dead," looks out and around its locality for its images and symbols and achieves a fine objectivity and tautness of context. Along with "91 Revere Street" it is *Life Studies*' best achievement. But the great style is forever behind him. And the best of what he could do in a confessional vein has already been suppressed. And when we add to this his mental pain, it is a triple tragedy.

When *Life Studies* came out we could hardly bear to read it. What pain, what horror had so numbed his soul? What had he been through, and his brave wife along with him? Worst of all, for us, there was the failure of his art, and the cover-up, the pretense that there must be some "breakthrough back into life," that if only the meter and rhyme were let out, if only the stanzas were relaxed,

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all would be well, when the truth was that under successive dehumanizing breakdowns and their therapies he had become so overwhelmed with destructive energies that he had little left to order his life and thought, little left for the cultivation of style. Jarrell's famous review of *Lord Weary* had noted that Lowell's poetry at its best was a poetry of the will. Now that will had partially cracked and he was filling his pages with family reminiscences and episodes of domestic strife, with the pretense that he had found some new, free form that allowed him to make a "breakthrough back into life."

Surely he would not lack for material, having decided to tap into his biography, having decided that his own life would be a fit subject and that the events could be rendered up *as is,* with very little transformation, not even the kind that usually goes into making a fable or a fiction. Indeed, had he not seen Jean Stafford doing the same in some of her stories, whole stories about him and her, with little changed but the characters' names? Why bother to change names? In any case, the poet, convinced that his own biography will provide a wealth of fabulous stuff, can take the events of his life and serve them up hot. For this purpose, free verse and fourteen-line dumpsters will be more apt; the old image-making sensibility will select the stuff, and the new "style" will be that of prose, seemingly offhand and serendipital, like that of a domestic diary. Lowell's search for a style has played a central role in the poetic dilemma of the last thirty years. In my own notebooks of the mid-Sixties there is this entry.

> The present situation in poetry is such that unprecedented numbers of poems are being written and published every year. It might appear mean-spirited to raise any questions about this abundance. After all, is it not a sign that the present situation is healthy? Are we not to be grateful for signs of life, whenever and wherever we find them? The answer is that of course we must be grateful for signs of life, but signs of life are not necessarily signs of art.
>
> The day of the nonstop analysis of poetry may be over, but never have poets and critics been so free with their views. Friends review friends, whom they praise for their original voices while blaming others for being satisfied with "the bored complacencies of rhyme and meter." Conventional verse has been called "well-cooked," "institutional," "academic," and "impersonal." Much verse is being published that looks like little more than notes for poems; the material of poetry is sometimes there, but in embryonic form, uncondensed and insufficiently shaped. Poetry of this sort may not be taxed with being derivative or academic; being embryonic it may be termed original, for it makes no attempt to approach the finish found in certain works of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Yeats, or Frost. In fact it has become unfashionable to speak of finish in poetry. By and large, this is the day of the easy free-verse poem. Few persons have the patience to weigh every syllable of a poem. One writer declares that poetry should represent the speed of thought. Another one speaks of the free-verse movement as "a great turning going on in American verse." Robert Lowell has complained that poetry is becoming "purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life." As one of the few living poets to have written any major finished poems, Lowell may be telling us why he turned to free verse. But what is the general implication of his statement? What is meant by "life"? Is the statement symptomatic of the loss of nerve felt almost everywhere? One poet after another seems to be saying: "The times are so difficult and man's faith in himself so shaken, how will poetry matter if it turns out that man does not matter? In any case, what's the use of trying to write a finished poem?"
>
> . . . The time is past when anything in iambics stood a fair chance of being published; now the free-verse ground swell is upon us. For one who has written in conventional form there is a strong attraction to free verse. But in choosing free verse the writer must ask himself whether he has undertaken a more difficult art, or whether, through loss of nerve, he has chosen an easier way of cranking it out.

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It is evident now, with Hamilton's life, that Lowell was not telling us the fundamental reasons for his search for a new style. Those reasons were emotional and temperamental, having to do with his personal relationships, his illnesses, his therapies, and the difficulty of carrying on with conventional form. His turn to prose upon emerging from Payne Whitney gave him a chance to delve into family materials, particularly those of boyhood. Unlike his earlier breakdowns in which he saw himself as Christ-like or Napoleonic, his Payne Whitney delusion was that he was once again a wicked boy suddenly freed from parental control. After his "enthusiasm" and manic antics died away, he said that "Images of my spoiled childhood ached inside me . . . ." Thus Lowell's prose writing is also a part of his therapy, by which he lets out the burden of his childhood and avoids the intoxication of writing in his high poetic style. Hardwick writes to friends that he is "his old self again, . . . at his desk each day for sixteen hours or so." Hamilton says, "The prose 'reminiscences' were a way of cementing Lowell's new, time-tabled calm—prose, Lowell found, need not thrive on bouts of high 'enthusiasm.'"

Elizabeth Bishop, who envies him his distinguished family biography—"All you have to do is put down the names!"—writes back an encouraging letter. "I think all the family group—some of them I hadn't seen in Boston—are superb, Cal." But Bishop has probably been intimidated by him. She has cut short her recent (summer 1957) visit because "she felt Cal was getting sick and part of it was getting very amorous with her." Jarrell writes Lowell that he admires "Skunk Hour." Only Allen Tate, who also likes "Skunk Hour," has the nerve to state the negative: ". . . *all* the poems about your family, including the one about you and Elizabeth, are definitely *bad* . . . . the poems are composed of unassimilated details, terribly intimate, and coldly noted, which might well have been transferred from your autobiography without change . . . . The free-verse, arbitrary and without rhythm, reflects this lack of imaginative focus." Tate wonders, in letters to others, if Lowell is entering into another manic phase. Hardwick gets wind of it and writes Tate indignantly that the three and a half months he has been working on *Life Studies* have been "marvellously quiet ones with us . . . . he was not sick when he worked over and over on those poems and I don't agree with you in the least about them." But Tate's guess proves right; within days Lowell is in Boston Psychopathic Hospital where he meets a "psychiatric fieldworker," declares his love for her and proclaims his plans to make "a new life." Out of the hospital a few days, he is once again speeding up, so Hardwick gets him admitted to McLean Hospital outside Boston. The following year, 1959, *Life Studies* is published, Lowell is again in the hospital, and Tate, writing him, capitulates: "You will be alright very soon . . . . your book is magnificent. All will be well."

And other friends of Lowell, keenly aware of his condition, publish reviews of the book ranging from the high praise of Richard Eberhart and F.W. Dupee to the high justifications of John Thompson: "The new poems have abandoned the myths of eschatology and the masks of heroes, but the violence and guilt, the unalleviated seizure of experience, these remain. This is why, perhaps alone of living poets, he can bear for us the role of the great poet, the man who on a very large scale sees more, feels more, and speaks more bravely about it than we ourselves can do." Ian Hamilton, too, works hard to point out felicities of sound, phrase, and image in Lowell's "informal" poems. But Tate's reservations remain. Though he somewhat overstates his position, the virtues of *Life Studies,* compared with those of the best earlier work, are very modest ones. In 1964 Lowell told Stanley Kunitz, "When I finished *Life Studies,* I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still hanging there. I don't know whether it is a death rope or a lifeline."

After 1950 there was a recurring question of where the Lowells would live, where they would settle. They liked the Boston area,

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despite Charlotte's presence. Forty miles from Boston they found a country house with three acres, at Duxbury. In Lowell's best poems there is often a joining of contemporaneity and history and a sense of place. Thoreau's Walden and Emerson's Concord are immediate to him. "The Concord Hymn" is at the foundation of some of his best work. "Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search / Of a tradition." He can sense the presence of the martyred Indians and hear the odd, cruel, charming, or deluded ancestors calling out to the poet to give them a voice. If one could imagine another life for the poet, he might have become ever more the villager and the countryman while keeping his watch on the roots and the current events of the republic. Instead he now begins his deep plunge into the urban chaos. When his mother died in 1954, Lowell gave up his Duxbury house the next year and moved to a house on Marlborough Street in Boston, "just exactly a block from the one I grew up in." In January 1957, Elizabeth gives birth to a daughter, Harriet, and Lowell writes, "We are in a state of tremendous excitement." But by 1960 Boston has lost its allure. Hardwick calls it "cozy, Victorian, and gossipy . . . . 'The nice little dinner party'—for this the Bostonian would sell his soul." They decide on the "wild electric beauty" of New York, and move into a "baronial" apartment on West Sixty-seventh Street in 1961. This move is plagued with difficulties, as the Boston house cannot be sold until the summer. So Hardwick is in a sense "still balanced between Boston and New York." Meanwhile Lowell begins to show signs of speeding up. Again there is "a girl," in this case a young New York poet. Lowell reasons with Hardwick that the move to New York implies not only a break with Boston but a breakup of their marriage, so that he can undergo a new birth. "O to break loose" (from "Near the Ocean") has now become the facile battle-cry. Blair Clark recalls that Lowell and the young woman called on him at his house:

> Cal was in terrible physical shape, shaking, panicky, God knows what he was taking in the way of drugs . . . sweating, lighting cigarettes, talking non-stop . . . . She was worried about him, because he was breathing badly, and drinking. So I spent the rest of the night trying . . . to get him to sleep. And I think the next day I took him to the hospital.

William Meredith visits him at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, in a locked ward on the twelfth floor:

> He wasn't dangerous to himself or others but he was so obstreperous . . . during those visits . . . he'd get through two pounds of chocolates and two packs of cigarettes . . . . he writes and revises translations furiously and with a kind [of] crooked brilliance, and talks about himself in connection with Achilles, Alexander, Hart Crane, Hitler and Christ, and breaks your heart.

Lowell spends about six weeks in Presbyterian. Before he leaves he sets up an apartment with the young woman. Once again Hardwick is left to meditate on "that baffling question of why one tortures the person he most loves and upon whom his happiness depends." Hardwick describes herself as "utterly petrified. I was terribly upset. This was one of the few times when I can say I was truly depressed, and crying, and just terrible." She packs up herself and Harriet, now four, and moves back to Boston. Soon afterward, Lowell walks out on his young mistress and returns to Hardwick: "He came home very low and sad. Just shattered." On June 30 they drive off to Castine, in Maine, to the house that Cousin Harriet Winslow in Washington has given to them.

In June 1962, on tour in Brazil and Argentina, Lowell suffers another of his speed-ups. He seems overwrought and is drinking heavily. Once again he meets Elizabeth Bishop, who lives in Rio, swearing his love, proposing marriage. Her response is to try to get him to give up the remainder of his tour and go home, but to no avail. He continues his mad escapade in Buenos Aires, meets a knowing Argentine woman named

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Luisa, who eventually lures him into a psychiatric hospital, where, strapped hand and foot, he takes 2,000 milligrams of Thorazine a day. On the plane home, accompanied by a doctor and nurse, Lowell falls in love with the stewardess. "The stewardess left the plane at Asunción and Lowell demanded that he be allowed to go with her, get married, start a new life in South America." In New York he is met by Hardwick and his psychiatrist, and committed to the Institute for Living in Hartford, Connecticut.

In February 1963 Hardwick is involved in founding *The New York Review of Books.* Lowell is writing the poems that will go into *For the Union Dead.* Hamilton is exactly right in singling out for praise the second stanza of "Night Sweat":

> Behind me! You! Again I feel the light
> lighten my leaded eyelids, while the gray
> skulled horses whinny for the soot of night.
> I dabble in the dapple of the day,
> a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,
> I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,
> my child exploding into dynamite,
> my wife . . . your lightness alters everything,
> and tears the black web from the spider's sack,
> as your heart hops and flutters like a hare.
> Poor turtle, tortoise, if I cannot clear
> the surface of these troubled waters here,
> absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear
> this world's dead weight and cycle on your
> back.

This does, as Hamilton claims, "resurrect something of the iambic early Lowell" while it "proves that high rhetoric need not inflate or falsify." But Lowell did not, or could not, follow it up.

By the end of 1963 Lowell is committed once again to the Institute for Living. *For the Union Dead* is completed. In the early months of 1964 he is preparing the book for publication. He then turns his attention to *The Old Glory,* his trio of short plays that will be produced in November. By the end of the year he is beginning to speed up again. By January 1965 he is seeing a Latvian woman, a performer of Indian sacred dances. He is ready to throw over everything for life with her. By the end of the month he is again in the Institute for Living, still planning to make a life with the Latvian. Hardwick writes to Blair Clark:

> I begin to think perhaps Cal should make one last effort to cure himself or at least be happier, if only temporarily, than he is with me . . . . I say all this to you, darling friend, in good faith. I don't want to force Cal back.

But in February Lowell asks to come home again, and she writes him: "Dear one: I got your Friday note today. Cal my heart bleeds for you, but remember what greatness you have made of your life, what joy you have given all of us. My purpose, beloved, is to try to see *what can be done to help us all.* I hate for you to get sick. I would kill myself if it would cure you. There must be something more we can lean on—medical, psychiatric, personal, the dearest love goes out to you from your apartment here on Sixty-seventh Street. I long to talk to you again."

Fine people caught in awful straits—a cycle that would recur, with few variations, again and again. Of what use is it to review the details? Only to show how experience altered their lives, how they faced it, and, particularly in Lowell's case how it twisted and flattened and narrowed his work. The details set forth here constitute a very small portion of Hamilton's richly supplied book, enough perhaps to indicate the quality of the experience of the principals. Considering the seriousness of his disease and its treatments, it is a wonder that Lowell was able to write any poems as good as the best of his later works, a wonder that he could write any poems at all. That he could have pulled himself together to carry on the fine table talk of his later years, that he could have retained the warmth and charm that he showed to the end, is wonderful. That he could carry on his vatic role, opposing Johnson's war effort, leading the Washington rally, campaigning with Eugene McCarthy, raising the national consciousness, is miraculous.

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The critical question remains: Why would one give preference to Lowell's later work —the work following *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*:

1. Because it is so accomplished in its own right that it represents the tremendous culmination of the author's style and thought.

2. Because of the reader's prurient interest in self-revelation, in details of drugs, drinks, smokes, failed marriages, erotic flings, bizarre, often violent fits, maniacal self-images, and chronic hospitalizations.

3. Because the poet's brilliance and affableness, his breeding and education, his early poems, his thoughtful teaching, his friendships and love affairs with persons of undoubted excellence so endeared him that those who knew him wanted to protect him in his illness, forgive his misdoings and weak writing, and encourage him in any turns he chose to take.

4. Because the poet so suffered from his upbringing in an emotionally confused home, from tampering and rejection by parents who ignored his gift, from psychotic enthusiasms that led him to a lifelong dependency on drugs, with concomitant depression and morbid self-recriminations, and because from an early time he associated his ills with the ills of history and of his own time, he must be regarded not only as a maker of poems but as a sort of suffering servant, a martyr, a scapegoat who took upon himself—almost as if he were doing it *for us*—the anxiety, the uncertainty, and the suffering of our time.

5. Because the American literary establishment, publishers, reviewers, and scholars, had a vested interest in promoting and applauding his every new trend. Once the Lowell machine got rolling it was worth lots of notices. Harvard finally obtained his papers for $140,000. Fortunately this happened about ten years before he died and allowed him to afford his second divorce.

When I remarked to my undergraduate teacher Arthur Mizener that most writers seemed given to neurosis, he replied that that was the name of the game. I was young, and had yet to observe any actual madness. Soon I observed plenty of it, in Iowa City. Then Lowell arrived, and he was such a nifty man, teacher, and poet that I didn't see it in him right away, except that I had seen it for sure in the poems, knew that the poems were good enough to exemplify Pope's dictum that the style is the man, and that Lowell was deeply troubled.

He was just on the verge of what may have been the most dreadful of all his dreadful years, 1954. The reception of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* had left him with deep doubts about his work. He had begun to think that there must be an easier way to live and work than to remain imprisoned in the tight forms. "Lowell's difficulty," as Hamilton shrewdly observes, "was that rhyme and meter were for him very close to being the 'natural speech' William Carlos Williams and his followers were always calling for. . . . Williams, he felt, was unique, but 'dangerous and difficult to imitate.' His disciples were spiritless and programmatic."

Years later, Lowell gave a poetry reading to a large crowd in New York: it was 1977, a few months before his death by a heart attack. He is sharing the platform with Allen Ginsberg. In the crowd, heckling Lowell from time to time, is the Beat poet Gregory Corso, wife and bawling baby at his side. Lowell perseveres. He reads "Phillips House Revisited" and "Ulysses and Circe" (from his last book *Day by Day*); "Waking Early Sunday Morning" (from *Near the Ocean*, 1967); and "To Speak of in Woe that is Marriage," "Man and Wife," and "To Delmore Schwartz" (from *Life Studies,* 1959). Not one of these is a poem for which Lowell will be revered in the coming century. But he also reads "For the Union Dead," written in 1960, and the best of his later poems. Lowell called this his "most composed poem." Here again is the marvelous convergence of the poet's boyhood—when he frequented the now ruined South Boston Aquarium—with a significant trouble in history as represented by St. Gaudens's Civil War relief depicting Colonel Shaw and his Negro infantry whom he marched into battle to die.

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Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.

Lowell's dictum is that experience is most interesting when it is painful, when one "experiences what one does not wish to experience." Here is the same powerful formula of elements as in "At the Indian Killer's Grave." Unlike many of Lowell's later history poems, this is more than an evocation of a past hero or a past event. The poem's questions of war and racial injustice are even more painful in the present.

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
On Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children
rise like balloons.

The grand style has been lost; there is no metrical base. The rhythms are less subtle than in much of Williams, whose example nonetheless informs them. Could the poem be as well laid out as prose? Not really, for it is quite concentrated. The verse layout provides in effect additional punctuation, through additional pauses. It slows the pace and increases the work's duration. By slightly retarding the presentation of the images it gives us a little better chance to savor the associations. This advantage is even more important when the poem is skillfully read aloud. It is Lowell's best achievement in a "public" style.

But in the context of Lowell's oeuvre one cannot avoid the conclusion that "For the Union Dead," compelling though it is, is a *tour de force*. To pretend otherwise would be to perpetuate a cruel delusion if not a hoax concerning his later work, and put off the evaluation of his best. In preferring a poet's earlier work one risks comparison with Oliver St. John Gogarty, who preferred "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to all of Yeats's later poems. I wish I could prefer Lowell's later poems as I do Yeats's. Lowell's best dozen poems—almost all written before 1951—will have a place next to the best of Ransom, Tate, Schwartz, Jarrell, and Berryman. Taken at its best there is no higher or headier poetry in our literature.

Hamilton has given us a moving account of Lowell's life. We look forward to a complete edition of Lowell's prose autobiography, bound to be his most painful triumph. Though his example is spectacular, he is not the last of our brilliant friends to nourish a career, if not a fortune, upon sympathy for his suffering. It is equally clear that his life has an importance beyond his importance as a maker of poems. So brilliant in his resurgences from illness, in his resurrections, in his renewed erections, so vulnerable and prone to fall again, so alive in his breadth of learning, in his feel for the body politic, so single-minded in his drive to publish his woes, he stands as our high-born, high-minded scapegoat, the unlikely prophet of our shabby day.

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Painting at Fenway Court

by Mary Crawford Volk

Recent exhibitions in this country demonstrate that American taste has historically favored the great pictorial traditions of the Renaissance and Baroque far more avidly than is often realized, and that modern study of this phenomenon largely remains to be undertaken. To this end, the show just opening in Washington at the National Gallery of Art called "Raphael and America"[1] addresses this specific theme of American taste for an individual Renaissance painter of genius within the context of the cinquecentennial celebration this year of the artist's birth. To a certain extent such a show becomes necessarily a gathering of paintings by the young Raphael, those done before the more monumental and conspicuous Roman projects which largely define his position in the High Renaissance.

With a superb nucleus of works at the National Gallery itself, David Allen Brown, who conceived the show and wrote the accompanying catalogue, has made a contribution to this subject, and scholarly papers given at a three-day symposium immediately prior to the opening, which are scheduled for publication, will further extend knowledge of the works exhibited. Brown's catalogue is particularly noteworthy for the substantial attention it pays to the hitherto unexplored history of Raphael's appeal to the two most dramatic generations of American collectors, those active from the Gilded Age through the first half of this century. It was at this early time that Raphaels became the proud possessions of such American collectors as Pierpont Morgan and the Wideners, and only slightly later that Andrew Mellon, who had once refused to buy a Raphael portrait, changed his position and acquired three works by the artist.

Distinguished among these wealthy and acquisitive American collectors of Raphael was the shrewd and indomitable mistress of Fenway Court in Boston's Back Bay, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1925). Although nothing from Fenway Court appears in the "Raphael and America" exhibition, (due to provisions in Mrs. Gardner's will), the Gardner collection can tell us much about the traditions of collecting and taste in this country and Europe and, perhaps as important, about what a museum is, should, or can be. Such study yields a complex combination of influences and motivations within which "Mrs. Jack," as her contemporaries called her, acquired her masterpieces and built her palace to house them.

A quotation from Henry James's famous lines on the Gardner collection is inscribed on a plaque at the Museum's entrance. His words, written during his visit to this country in 1904 after twenty years' residence abroad, capture one dilemma of the Fenway Court phenomenon:

1 "Raphael and America," organized by David Allen Brown, will be on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from January 9 through May 8.

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> To attempt to tell the story of the wonderfully-gathered and splendidly-lodged Gardner Collection would be to displace a little the line that separates private from public property; and yet to find no discreet word for it is to appear to fail of feeling for the complexity of conditions amid which so undaunted a devotion to a great idea . . . has been able consummately to flower. It is in presence of the results magnificently attained, the energy triumphant over everything, that one feels the fine old disinterested tradition of Boston least broken.

James, an intimate of Isabella Gardner for over two decades when he wrote this, had just visited the Museum, and thus would have seen it at the time of its greatest celebrity, the months after its official opening on New Year's Day evening, 1903. But in feeling "the fine old disinterested tradition of Boston least broken," the author allowed his disenchantment with modern America to mist his vision. Mrs. Jack's Fenway Court represented a departure from, not a continuation of, local traditions: it embodies various European forms in an environment which deftly projected their special relevance for turn-of-the-century American culture.

Consider, for example, Mrs. Jack's activity as patroness. Works by artists of local accomplishment but, in her view, outstanding promise figured frequently among her acquisitions from the 1880s through the end of the century. Drawings, watercolors, and paintings by Dodge Macknight, Denis Bunker, Louis Kronberg, and John Appleton Brown entered her collection by purchase or gift in an atmosphere of encouragement which often matured into friendship. Whistler, on the other hand, was actively pursued at his studios in Paris and London for sketches and small works that caught her fancy. Some six of these, including the *Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville,* were obtained this way in a series of visits between 1886 and 1895, years of controversy and hardship for the artist. But her most deliberate patronage was reserved for John Singer Sargent, whose success as a portraitist she actively promoted and from whom in 1887-88 she managed to extract, perhaps in conscious awareness of his earlier image of Mme Gautreau, a highly original and evocative full-length portrait. As with the Gautreau image, the Gardner portrait is usually discussed in terms of its precipitation of a social scandal when it was first publicly exhibited. But perhaps as important to an understanding of Sargent's relationship to Mrs. Jack is the fact that fifteen years later, in the first year of Fenway Court's existence, the artist actually resided and painted in the Gothic Room, at that time not part of the public rooms of the Museum. As such he assumed something akin to the traditional position of a court portraitist.

Next to Sargent's famous image of her, which hangs in a corner facing the main entrance to the Gothic Room and establishes a primary visual focus there, Mrs. Jack placed one of the most important of her distinguished collection of Italian primitives, a small panel by Giotto. The juxtaposition is a sophisticated and resonant one: brilliant display and enlightened connoisseurship are combined in a manner reminiscent of the traditions of the European courts.

Bernard Berenson of course brought the Giotto to Mrs. Jack's attention, in 1900; he had been advising her on purchases since 1894. Her inclination to acquire works by little-known early Italian masters, however, must also be considered in light of her study and close friendship with another, somewhat different, "apostle of culture," Charles Eliot Norton. Norton's lectures at Harvard from 1874 through the end of the century inveighed against the vulgarity of conventional American taste and particularly enshrined the Gothic as a pinnacle of cultural accomplishment. It was Norton, it may be recalled, who had unsuccessfully but fervently tried to get the Boston Athenaeum to acquire James Jackson Jarves's collection of early Italian art at an earlier date, and he who could write that most post-Gothic art was unworthy of serious attention because impious, overly luxurious, and lacking in "moral temper." The directly related ques-

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tion of Mrs. Jack's own piety arises here.

Fenway Court, in the manner of noble and indeed royal dwellings in Europe, possessed a private chapel, and Mrs. Jack's membership in the Church of the Advent, the Anglican communion of the Catholic Church, was active and lifelong. On one of her earliest extended European sojourns, in 1879 with her husband, she undertook a careful tour of French and English cathedrals, and Gothic details abound in the architecture and interior appointments at Fenway Court. They seem governed less by an interest in historical reproduction, however, than by a desire to conjure a visual beauty with spiritual associations. On Henry Adams's advice she bought splendid stained glass, and it has been remarked that the medieval sculpture in her collection was among the earliest to enter this country.

If the medieval and early Italian objects in the Gardner collection have always been deservedly famous, they nonetheless must share distinction with a group of masterpieces from a wholly different historical period: the sixteenth and, especially, seventeenth centuries. Mrs. Jack's acquisition of an extraordinary group of fine paintings from these centuries took place rapidly and with a certain drama between about 1892 and 1902, and obviously was not inspired by any lectures by Norton. Indeed, while Berenson intervened in most, if not all, of these purchases, they did not represent, as the early Italian pictures do, an area in which his connoisseurship was particularly extensive. Their choice as well as placement at Fenway Court reveals perhaps more tellingly than any other aspect of her museum what Mrs. Jack herself conceived her position to be.

On entering Fenway Court the visitor passes into a garden courtyard, richly planted and always blooming. Embellished with a number of classical sculptures and paved at the center with a Roman mosaic, the court surprises and charms after the experience of the exterior of the building, bluff and unadorned to the point of barrenness. Across the court a double stair rises steeply to the level of the second-floor balcony, where a triple Gothic window permits a view into the chamber behind it. And clearly visible from below, framed in one arch of the window, is one of the paintings that contributes to the special character of this large room: Rembrandt's double portrait of a gentleman and lady. It was at the top of a similar stair in the original music room, now dismantled, that Mrs. Jack stood on opening night at the Museum, dressed elegantly in simple black, to receive her guests. The evening's activities were much delayed at first owing to the prescribed form of the guests' reception: each had to mount the stair, greet his hostess, and then descend the other side. Mrs. Jack literally held court at Fenway Court that night.

The Dutch Room, where the Rembrandt double portrait hangs, was the location for the supper that evening and functioned on other frequent occasions as a reception room and gathering place. Its semi-public character guaranteed that the paintings in it were viewed in circumstances of considerable social formality. Might this not give special resonance to the particular works placed in this important room?

The Rembrandt hung next to Rubens's portrait of the Earl of Arundel, a powerful image that dominates the wall by its scale and central position. Next appears another Rembrandt, *Storm on the Sea of Galilee,* and across from it, beside the entrance door, a third, an early self-portrait acquired in 1896. At the windows along the west wall now can be seen Vermeer's *Concert,* one of the first paintings by the artist to enter this country. Mrs. Jack had personally attended the Paris sale of Thoré-Burger's collection in 1892 and had an agent bid for the little picture, one of three Vermeers in the sale. In the first years of the Museum's existence, the Vermeer was paired with another Dutch genre scene, Ter Borch's *Lesson on the Theorbo,* hung near the fireplace in the southeast corner of the room. On the other side of the fireplace was a second pair of small pictures, Holbein's portraits of Sir William Butts and his wife. Near the Rembrandt

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self-portrait and almost directly opposite the Arundel image appears Van Dyck's *Lady with a Rose,* whose precise identity is conjectural but whose style and physical type is certainly English. The principal later addition to this gathering was made in 1910, when Zurbarán's *Doctor of Law,* an impressive full-length portrait of a young man in doctoral robes, was bought and hung next to the *Galilee.*

On the afternoon of the first occasion of a reception in the Dutch Room in late October of 1902 and shortly before the official opening of the building, the room was referred to as the "Sala degli Ambasciatori." Matthew Stewart Prichard, a house guest of Isabella Gardner's at the time and one of the new members of the young Museum of Fine Arts staff, whose own building was developing a short distance away, used the phrase in a letter. Since he was much involved in a controversy concerning the proper installation of works at his own institution, he no doubt used it in full knowledge of its connotations. As a room *for* ambassadors, of course, the Dutch Room acted as the setting for Mrs. Jack's frequent entertainments for her wide circle of friends in Boston and from abroad—she was indefatigable as a hostess to distinguished foreign visitors and also arranged gatherings of the socially prominent, like the tea for Lady Somerset, the honored guest the day Prichard wrote.

But it was a room *of* ambassadors as well. Rubens's *Arundel* perhaps sets the tone of courtly culture and international diplomacy that the paintings as a group evoke. Rubens conceived the portrait of course while ambassador to England for Philip IV of Spain, fresh from his experience of Titian at Madrid, and Arundel can hardly be bettered as a courtier, diplomat, and symbol of culture at the English court itself. Van Dyck's *Lady* opposite adds further resonance to the allusion to the Caroline court, and enriches the cultural air by sharply recalling the pose of Leonardo's most famous portrait. Indeed, Berenson, who recommended the picture to Mrs. Jack in 1897, aroused her interest by calling it "Van Dyck's Mona Lisa." The two Holbeins obviously possess associations with the English court also, as Butts was physician to Henry VIII, and Holbein's position as court painter is well known. They suggest a secondary level of associations among the paintings as well, of scholarship and intellectual accomplishment, since Butts was closely tied to Cambridge. Zurbarán's *Doctor* wears the robes of the University of Salamanca, and this conceivably accounts for its inclusion in 1910, but the painting seems to have derived from the great seventeenth-century picture gallery of the Marquis of Leganés, one of Philip IV's leading courtiers and diplomats, and it is likely that this fact appealed more to Mrs. Jack than the academic costume worn by the anonymous subject.

The Rembrandts, however, seem to elude comfortable inclusion within a courtly or ambassadorial framework, and it is they, indeed, that have been considered a dominant visual force in the room. The artist's presence is felt by virtue of the sheer number of pictures by him—the three mentioned are all readily visible and the fourth, *Landscape with Obelisk,* is enshrined near the west windows next to the Vermeer. And while the youthful self-portrait and double portrait reflect Rembrandt's social circumstances and aspirations in his early years, the landscapes hardly express a set of similar concerns. Moreover, there is evidence that Mrs. Jack was interested in other such works by Rembrandt, such as *The Mill,* now in Washington, which she failed to obtain.

Is it the very exceptionality of Rembrandt and Dutch art that attracted Mrs. Jack? The Gardners had made a special trip to the museums and monuments of Holland in 1879, the same year as their cathedral tour, and Dutch art was also popular in Boston exhibitions at the time they began serious collecting. Mrs. Jack may have sought Rembrandt simply because of the esteem in which he was held by her generation—very high, especially in Boston. But there is also the fact that three of the four Rembrandts she owned had an English connection in their own right. The double portrait and

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Galilee had come from the Hope collection, an important collection formed originally by Henry Hope (who had settled in Amsterdam in Rembrandt's own time) and later sold by his descendants at London in 1898, and the self-portrait had been in the Duke of Buckingham's collection in the early part of the century. By this measure even Rembrandt would reflect the atmosphere of cultured internationalism which permeates the Dutch Room.

Against this must be set the rather different chambers at Fenway Court given over to the exaltation of a specific artist. The Raphael Room, for example, containing Raphael's portrait of *Tommaso Inghirami,* a small panel by him, and Botticelli's *Tragedy of Lucretia,* is a small room directly across the court from the Dutch Room filled with paintings and other objects which evoke associations with the artist and his ambience. It is usually entered from the room of early Italian paintings, and the Raphael portrait immediately engages one's attention from its strategic location at the left corner directly opposite the entrance. Located exactly over this room on the third floor above, the Titian Room is presided over by the *Rape of Europa,* which hangs not coincidentally, in an identical location opposite the door. Surrounded by works almost without exception acquired as Venetian, the Titian emphasizes the affinity Mrs. Jack felt for the history and culture of that city. Even the portrait of Philip IV associated with Velásquez that hangs nearby is meaningful less for its artistic merit than for the fact that it depicts one of the most important early owners of the *Europa.*

Both these rooms would have been seen *after* the Dutch Room, which in Mrs. Jack's day began an extended tour of the rooms. It is as if the Dutch Room establishes a metaphor for the *kind* of collection to be seen at Fenway Court, and the works gathered elsewhere on the second and third floors become demonstrations of the richness of its references. The Titian Room, significantly, would have been the last seen, guaranteeing that visitors ended their experience with a memory of one of the most spectacular works she owned. Few other paintings could have conjured so rich an array of associations with royal and noble patronage, collecting, and diplomatic exchange. As Berenson skillfully put it, "It is only poetic justice that a painting intended originally for a Stewart should rest at last in the hands of a Stewart."

Why else except to preserve such courtly traditions would the terms of Mrs. Jack's will stipulate so firmly that the Museum should remain exactly as it was in her lifetime? Of course, such a stipulation also preserves the fin-de-siecle ambience which she created for her collection, an informed mixture of history and connoisseurship ordered according to strong personal preferences. It is this air of an immutable memorial, perhaps, that most often frustrates the contemporary viewer. Low lighting, the unfamiliar juxtaposition of objects, rich hangings, memorabilia—none of these are meaningful now to visitors accustomed to pale surfaces and the graphic definition of many modern installations. But this is, in a way, exactly Mrs. Jack's point. Like the entail of a great noble house, Fenway Court stands imperturbably against the vicissitudes of taste and economy in the later twentieth century, quietly insistent that visitors now, just as on that opening night in 1903, continue to render homage to the "Queen of Back Bay."

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A family of ghosts
by Frederick Brown

Last Spring, Le Seuil in Paris published a collection of letters which their anonymous editor claims to have found in the attic of a French château. Written between 1892 and 1902, they are remarkable not only for the tale that unfolds in them, but also for the extraordinarily vivid picture they draw of the *petite noblesse,* the landed gentry who maintained themselves as a distinct class until the 1914-18 war swept away almost everything on which their existence had been based. *Marthe* records one instance of that decline.[1]

When the story opens, Marthe de Montbourg is twenty, unmarried, and several months shy of bearing a child gotten on her by a servant or farmhand at the family estate in Normandy. From this predicament there arises a series of calamities which Marthe's widowed mother, Emilie de Montbourg, describes in detail to her brother, Charles de Cerilley, himself a prolific letter writer. The titular heroine seldom appears onstage. What we see of Marthe are mostly images projected by those people in whose hands her fate lies: her mother, guardian, uncle, and, later, husband.

To avoid scandal, Emilie de Montbourg leaves Normandy with her daughters (the older being a shadowy, neurasthenic figure who has renounced marriage) and seeks the anonymity of Paris, where Marthe spends the last months of her confinement in a quasi-religious home for pregnant girls. Once the child is born, they settle in Grasse, near Nice, and from their place of exile undertake to find a man who will legitimize Marthe's son and satisfy her lusty nature. Having little else to occupy her mind besides this project, upon which the family's honor hinges, Emilie enlists the help of priests and relatives. Personal ads are placed and answered. Minute inquiries are made to verify the credentials of suitors in whose judgment the burden Marthe brings is outweighed by the handsome dowry that comes along with her. After two years, during which time a pharmacist, a postal functionary, and two stationmasters receive tortured consideration, the search ends with a man from the neighborhood, Robert Caron d'Aillot, who has demonstrated no perceptible talent at earning a livelihood—quite the contrary—but who enjoys in Emilie's eyes the inestimable advantage of possessing, like Marthe, a noble patronymic.

The marriage proves almost immediately to be disastrous, and letters flying among the concerned parties leave nothing unsaid of the quarrels that rage between Marthe and Robert. The latter, together with his mother and maiden sisters, apparently tyrannizes Marthe in the name of moral rehabilitation. "A good husband who has shown patience and perseverance . . . in trying to make a gentlewoman of a poor lost girl ridden with defects and vices" is how Robert

1 *Marthe* will be published in the fall of 1983 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. It will be translated by Ralph Manheim.

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portrays himself. Marthe becomes a virtual prisoner, employing ruses to let the outside world know how things really stand while feigning happiness and contrition in letters written under her husband's guidance.

Several years pass before she can muster the courage to flee. She has been hindered from doing so by a sexual bond to which she freely admits, by the knowledge that her family—or at least the head of the family, Charles de Cerilley, whose opinions usually prevail—fear her freedom more than they deplore her enslavement, and, finally, by the evidence of a tainted past, which would undermine complaints she brought against her husband in a court of law. Halfway through the correspondence we learn from Robert that Marthe's pregnancy was not, as he had been told, the result of a singular lapse but of sexual adventures begun at age fourteen and tolerated by Emilie. Having a secret of her own to conceal, Emilie was the more disposed to turn a blind eye upon her daughter's promiscuity. This "secret," when Robert suddenly bares it, introduces the family ghost, M. Armand de Montbourg, of whom we have heard no such nostalgic invocations as one might have expected from a widow unable to discipline a rebellious child. If we may believe Robert, or his informant Marthe, Armand de Montbourg had contracted syphilis during a youthful affair with some dancer in Caen and later transmitted it to his wife. The fact that Marthe has had periodic skin eruptions since the age of nine persuades Robert that she was born diseased. Our attention thus shifts from her bastard son to her own supposedly "vitiated" birth, with heredity entering the picture in its pseudo-scientific, nineteenth-century role as a stand-in for original sin. Begotten by a fallen father—a *père déchu* Emilie calls him—the fallen woman was born to fall.

Marthe does not flee until her husband, believing that she has cuckolded him with a valet during one of his sojourns in Marseille (where Marthe claims he keeps a mistress), threatens to murder her. Before long, divorce proceedings begin. Under close examination by lawyers hired to represent Marthe, witnesses to her alleged indiscretion turn against Robert, who had apparently bullied them into perjuring themselves. Robert capitulates, a sum of money is settled on him, and he disappears from Marthe's life (we learn that he subsequently marries an English schoolteacher in Nice). Free at last to assume the responsibilities of motherhood, Marthe retrieves her four-year-old son, Georges, from the wet-nurse with whom he had been living since birth.

We are no sooner ensconced in the thought that justice won out when information he receives convinces Charles de Cerilley of the truth of Robert's allegation that Marthe had fornicated with the valet. "What the devil, I readily allow that hysteria is an untameable passion," exclaims the uncle, who, in his bewilderment, has had recourse to a psychological treatise by one Dr. Brouardel, "but it renders us oblivious to our acts only during *crises,* and in anticipation of such crises the honest soul appeals for protection. Did she? Assuredly not. When she hasn't been cynical with her mother she has put on shows of every kind, lying out of self-interest or fear, shrewdly imitating candor . . . ."

Once the drama has concluded, the personae are dispatched in quick succession. Marthe's child, sister, and mother all die of what is diagnosed as acute dysentery. Marthe herself retires with a female companion to a cottage outside Millau in the Aveyron and exchanges warm letters with her relatives, who dwell upon her duplicitous nature in correspondence among themselves. They do not disown her, but a consensus has been reached that she be treated as gingerly as if she were part snake. After several years, Marthe begins to ail. Her symptoms indicate a respiratory disorder, which goes unnamed. Several visits to the spa at Mont-Dore, for hydrotherapeutic treatment, have no effect and she dies in 1902 at the age of thirty. A final surprise awaits her survivors. While the letters they received from her led them to believe that she spent her last years grooming dogs for show, hunting small

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game, and otherwise disporting herself in a manner appropriate to her class, she had also been frequenting Millau's socialist club. This, during the Dreyfus Affair, can only be interpreted by Charles de Cerilley as Marthe's ultimate betrayal, and of a piece with those other misdemeanors that argue her undying *nostalgie de la boue.*

There is nothing more poignant about *Marthe* than the dilemma of Emilie de Montbourg shopping in a matrimonial bargain basement for the man who would "save" her daughter while doing her utmost to look grand. Indeed, she grew more and more fastidious in her concern with appearances as the prospect of coming down in the world was borne home by the humble applications her daughter received. "I feel incapable of resolving the difficulty of such a mismarriage, which negates the principles of my entire life," she declared when the candidate for Marthe's hand was a small-town stationmaster. "For the sake of my nephews and nieces and of our acquaintances, would it not be possible to save appearances by obtaining from the government, through financial means, authorization to add 'de Beauvoisin' to his name? His family comes from Pont de Beauvoisin in Dauphiné." This strategy (fashionable among newly enriched bourgeois) did not inhibit her, several years later, from telling one of those nephews on whose account she had been tempted to employ it, that he was right in scoring the aristocratic class for lacking honor, "because without honor it lacks its fundamental virtue." The ease with which Emilie could give the slip to her venal, calculating self and voice opinions worthy of Corneille's Infanta would have provided excellent material for a tragicomic role in *Remembrance of Things Past.* What strikes one as Proustian about her is the hysterical piety she lavished on forms that hid the real circumstances of her life (had she had the choice, she might have found satisfaction on the dueling ground—yet another anachronism available to brittle, fin-de-siècle sensibilities). Aristocracy had become snob theater and the gentlewoman a character forever reinventing herself.

Her moral investment in conventional appearances, ceremonies, and façades went together with the feeling that her honorable self was bonded to a wild woman and subject to acts over which she had no control. Here she exemplified a state of mind not at all uncommon among the upper classes. We need only consult books on domestic management, which proliferated during the late nineteenth century, to see how often the maid figured as one such threat. A manual read by girls in high school asserts that it is no easy task "mastering these untutored or degenerate natures" who, left to their own devices, would subvert home life. Even before she compromised herself, this intimate outsider stood accused of opening the family to public view, of absconding with its secrets and introducing, in her own person, a morbid element. Although material theft may have been widespread, the vigilance wives and mothers were urged to maintain bespoke a fear that embraced the whole issue of social identity. The maid-thief came from the underworld. There lurked in her not only a lower species (with all that that connoted in the way of coarse language, moral obtuseness, criminal physiognomy, disease) but a primitive past against which the combined agencies of church and state were thought to offer inadequate protection. Being sexually dangerous, she would, if let loose upon the husband or son, rob the family of a future by contaminating its offspring with her own degenerate nature.

Even more sinister than the maid was the ex-maid who, after leaving or being expelled from the domestic ranks, descended to the street and became a prostitute, like the Goncourt brothers' fictional heroine, Elisa (*La Fille Elisa*). Indoors she had had a mother substitute; outside no moral influence could touch her. Measures by which the government tried to sanitize prostitution did little to dispel the fears of ladies and gentlemen who pictured the prostitute as a fifth-columnist in a civil war that would either save or doom the family order. "[Prostitution]

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saps the family little by little, without one's being aware of it, much the way rats undermine a house unknown to its tenants," warned Dumas *fils* in his long preface to *The Lady of the Camelias,* which describes with alarm the mongrel species resulting from intermarriage between upright sons and fallen women. The power of infiltration conferred upon the prostitute lost nothing of its supernatural quality when, after 1878, researchers discovered the bacilli responsible for gonorrhea and syphilis. She was evil, a bearer of evil, and those who preached against her understood hell on earth to be the rotting away of posterity it was her mission to accomplish: the havoc socialists would wreak by political means she would sow in bed.

As the century wore on, this vision, which was profoundly related to the mass hysteria that beset France during the Dreyfus Affair (the Jew being another subversive bacillus), gained converts among men who ordinarily prided themselves in their skeptical demeanor. "Though it was not for some time apparent, a terrible anguish began to grip the medical corps," writes Professor Alain Corbin. "In that milieu, the conviction took hold that the prostitute was preparing or rather accelerating the destruction of the bourgeois classes. The two major phantasms of the age intersected each other here—fear of regression and fear of degeneration. The venal woman was indeed considered a model of regression." It is paradoxical that a society so baleful in its view of things to come should otherwise have set store by the idea of progress. Or perhaps the idea of progress was inherently bound up with this terror of regression that found a scientific rationale in theories of heredity and a genetic villain in the whore. At any rate, time no longer held indefinite promise for those whom it had once favored. It was seen more and more to hold buried secrets the revelation of which would kill, maim, or stunt the innocent.

What could be hidden from sight now would in due course, when "time ran out," produce a generation of hostages. Emilie de Montbourg's letters articulate the sense that time had indeed run out, that matrimony was more likely to visit ghosts upon the future than to create something greater or better. Thrown into a world abounding in secrets, Emilie is at once the sleuth for whom venality lurks everywhere and the fugitive with nowhere to go. "In truth, when a young man has had a stormy life, what does he unveil except that which he can't disguise? If all young men confessed beforehand to the family of their intended, how many marriages would take place?" she asks her brother, Charles de Cerilley. We know how Ibsen or Zola would have answered her. *Ghosts* and the novels that make up the *Rougon-Macquart* evoke a haunted world where the dead force the living to pay heavy tribute.

Such a tributary was Marthe, in whom her relatives saw not only those features that were often cited as belonging to the pathological condition of womankind (she is "incomplete," "unravelled," "hysterical," "fickle," "duplicitous") but others that set her apart. "You know very well that [should she divorce] the material consequence for her will be the street, *the street* you hear, so long as age will not have cooled *through and through* her morbid ardor," proclaimed Charles de Cerilley. Had she been a man, "morbid ardor" might have been called "slumming it" or passed off as inverted snobbery of the kind that had become fashionable in Paris, where the upper crust affected street slang and made forays into "Apache territory." As it was, there seemed no proper explanation for her affinity to men beneath her in social rank except the hereditary one, which had it that Armand de Montbourg's sins came home to roost in Marthe. "What then is this nature?" lamented Emilie, who, though not always unaware of the rage and shame from which Marthe's will to self-debasement sprang, felt genuinely baffled when told that her latest inamorato was an omnibus driver. Life had played Emilie dirty. For all her suffering motherhood, it had given her an aristocratic whore for a daughter, a *fille-mère* in whose

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freakish constitution nothing squared with the social norms of the day.[2] Robert Caron d'Aillot boasted that he had "made this little monstrosity a woman like other women," but even the penitential regime known as marriage failed to correct nature's wrong.

In her family's eyes, Marthe remained alien until the last, and when she died Charles de Cerilley forbade obituary notices to be published (here taking a page from Zola's *Docteur Pascal,* where Félicité Rougon, obsessed by the hereditary sequela her doctor son had recorded in abundant detail, burns the Rougon-Macquart's genealogical tree). Without an official announcement of its conclusion, her life would be as if it had never been. "She lied throughout her life; playacting came naturally to her" was all in the way of epitaph Charles de Cerilley allowed her.

As eager as he was to consign Marthe to oblivion, why did Charles de Cerilley preserve these letters, which have made her a celebrity in France eighty years after her unpublished death? He himself answers the question toward the end, in a note to Marthe that has nothing of his characteristic phlegm: "I am done weeding through the papers: God, how riveting these painful correspondences!!! and how important it is to save them! They are your protection." Even before the curtain had quite rung down on the drama in which he played an important role as Marthe's protector, he managed to gain distance from it and review its episodes as an enthusiastic spectator. What unexpectedly got the better of him was that huge nineteenth-century appetite for the intricately plotted story on which newspapers traded with the serial novel and lending libraries with the "three-decker." Tucked away in Burgundy, this squire, about whom one surmises that he usually applied himself to serious matters such as agronomy and law, had been kept in suspense during the previous seven years by the twists and turns of his unpredictable niece.

De Cerilley's remark has not allayed suspicions, which arose as soon as the book was published, that in *Marthe* someone with the gift of a Lampedusa or a Baronne de Lampeville produced a brilliant hoax. Most prominent among those to entertain such suspicions is the historian Philippe Ariès, who reviewed it for the international edition of *L'Express.* "Without one's interest waning—on the contrary, interest grows as enigma joins analysis—a doubt begins to gestate," he wrote. "The bride is too beautiful, the mores are too much what one would expect them to be. And there are, as I see it, several tiny faux pas, which, to be sure, could have been made by real letter-writers: in that era and milieu, when one casually mentioned the king, one would have been alluding to the Count of Chambord and not to his predecessors. Does a Norman squire need recipes for the manufacture of cider from his sister? . . ." In short, the book, like a phony antique whose very perfection betrays the hand of a forger, is too good to be true. Apart from several venial mistakes, its characters inspire disbelief by sporting their authenticity. But a doubt predicated on intuition is itself to be doubted and Ariès does not present as conclusive his hunch that *Marthe* consists of several genuine letters around which an epistolary fiction has been woven with consummate skill.

As we saw during the controversy over George de La Tour's painting, "The Fortune-teller," people who (unlike Ariès) have a vested interest in conspiratorial theories will always find a way to disqualify evidence brought against them. Unless Le Seuil, which can support the case for *Marthe*'s authenticity with solid *pièces justificatives*,

2 Feminist groups were often reluctant to take up the case of *fille-mères* for fear of discrediting themselves, and several even denounced unwed mothers in public debate. The most hospitable opinion was expressed by *La Française* in 1913: "A woman who gives herself outside marriage is guilty. But there exists no proportion between the nature of the error and the judgment with which the world scourges it . . . . What makes still more odious the shame inflicted on natural mothers and children is the absolution granted the father."

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turns out to have been the victim of a cunning subterfuge, I assume that we may take the publisher at his word. *Marthe* is a significant book. Not only does it tell a fascinating story, but it gives us abundant information about French marital law, medicine, and private life of the period. One could virtually compile a late-nineteenth-century pharmacopoeia from the letters sent by Emilie de Montbourg, who found consolation in dilating upon her family's ailments, diets, and drugs. Or one could use it, if one were so inclined, to write a horror tale about the treatment of female disorders.

In an essay entitled "Literary Memories," Paul Valéry wrote that at theaters and concert halls he would often imagine "an all-powerful sultan" surrounding the crowd and forcing everybody in it to relate the strangest thing he had ever seen, heard, or experienced. "What a catch! What an abundance of impressions!" he exclaimed. "[Squeezed like a sponge], the public would see its personal past, its singular experiences stream before it. For the public itself is that sultan who sits bored upon his treasures. A writer, be he poet or storyteller, is just another man bold enough to have broken the general silence and taken the floor." What we find in *Marthe* are characters who broke the silence unintentionally and wrote their story with none of the self-consciousness that often afflicts those who resolve to take the floor. This may be yet another reason for the wide friendship the book has acquired since its publication last year.

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Metrical illiteracy

by Brad Leithauser

American verse is probably passing through a peculiar period when the word *disturbing* can, unadorned, serve as commendation on a dust jacket. The willing reader, or at least the willing reader of advertisements and blurbs for books of contemporary poetry, is offered *disturbing collections* and *disturbing new voices* and *disturbing sensibilities.*

To this particular reader of poetry, the word seems ironically appropriate. For while the books themselves are apt to prove not so much *disturbing* in any tonic, regenerative sense as simply *dismaying,* the state of contemporary verse as a whole does seem disturbing in the prime, portentous connotations of the word—worrisome, unsettling, even destructive.

Anyone generalizing about contemporary American poetry must first acknowledge that given its diffuse, factionalized condition any conclusions must be presented with hesitation. For diffusion more than any unifying trait defines its fundamental nature, and indeed at once provides the generalizer with one impregnably safe generalization: American poetry has never passed through such a scattered era. This diffusion may be a result of the deaths in the last few decades of so many of its ablest practitioners and guides (Eliot, Frost, Roethke, Bishop, Berryman—and these but begin the unhappy list), or perhaps it is tied to the larger directionlessness that seems presently to haunt so many of the arts.

Hesitantly, then, I would suggest that a second generalization might safely be tendered: there is a widespread perception that we are not living in a golden age of poetry, and that mediocrity prevails in the periodicals and on the bookstore shelves. It is this near-unanimous consensus that is of interest here rather than the mediocrity itself, for mediocre poems have always preponderated in the periodicals and on the bookstore shelves, and always will. In many of the anthologies of ten and twenty years ago one met boisterous assertions that American poetry was passing through a great age (a greatness variously led, depending on the anthologist's predilections, by the Beats or the New York School or the Whomevers). This is a claim less frequently or easily made now, I suspect, when our *vitality* rather than our *greatness* will likely be cited. Of course this consensus concerning the mediocrity of contemporary poetry is superficial and fragile. On closer examination, one would find little agreement about which constitute the few good, needle-bright poems, and which the haystack of bad ones. Still, this consensus offers its revealing and rather humorous picture—that of hundreds and hundreds of bad poets saying, "There are hundreds and hundreds of bad poets out there."

A third generalization is that very few young writers have worked diligently in poetic form. Such a commonplace is this that it's apt to obscure a rather remarkable fact. Never before in the long line of English verse have we seen the ascendancy of genera-

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tions of poets who have at no time in their careers worked seriously with form. There are sometimes compelling artistic reasons for abandoning form, a few of which I will touch on, but most lying outside the focus of this article. Nonetheless, this abandonment represents a fundamental schism, something far more significantly divisive than any mere shift in formal fads or tastes. Throughout history, traditional forms and conventions have of course suffered their eclipses; the search for new methods and the impatience with tired ones (what Keats called "dead leaves in the bay wreath crown") have generated much of the brilliance and excitement of English literature. Take for example that robust Italian music box the sonnet (from "sonnetto," little song or sound). After displaying an overtaking brilliance under Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Herbert, it was essentially set aside for more than a century; was born again, singing new melodies, with Wordsworth and the Romantics; underwent a great many freshening changes only to find itself, with Cummings and Pound a hundred years later, successfully sporting *thee*'s and *hath*'s and other locutions that Wordsworth himself on a good day probably would have eschewed as old-fashioned. A sonnet in the level, colloquial voice of Elizabeth Bishop may seem hundreds of years advanced over the rounded, often florid intonings of Edna St. Vincent Millay (though both women's working lives overlapped), and the former's work may even be seen as something of a repudiation of the latter's. Yet this process of repudiation, the fertile ferment of quiet revolution, is all taking place within the larger domain of English formal poetry. Two poets working in form, whatever the distaste they harbor for each other's verse, will probably share a kinship which a formal poet and an exclusively free-form poet will not know.

A fourth and final generalization is that while the poetry market in this era of blockbuster books is pitifully small, and a hardcover printing may run less than a thousand copies for even a prize-winning poet of some "fame" (a word that usually trumpets with bombastic humor when applied to any inhabitant of the contemporary American poetry scene), there are far more poets out there, and far more poems being produced, than ever before. One hears that an open manuscript competition like that for the Yale or Whitman Prize may draw a couple of thousand submissions—more submissions than the winning manuscript will sell books. More colleges are teaching poetry writing than ever before; more students are graduating from such classes and colleges in treadmill search of other such classes to teach.

Obviously these four conditions—diffusion, perceived mediocrity, the eschewal of form by the young, and an ever expanding number of poets—will greatly overlap. Take for example the last of these, poetry's burgeoning population. In a mock-scholarly way, one might even chart (much as an ecologist charts the population of birds or fish based on data about weather, predators, etc.) how the first three conditions might affect the number of people who choose to write poetry. For example, we would expect diffusion and population to exist in direct correlation: the more poets we have, the less we can logically expect unanimity or the hegemony of a single poetic school; conversely, the more diffusion, the greater the chance that new people will encounter some inspiring style or subject matter that nudges them into writing verse. The perception of mediocrity, too, can lead to rising numbers; for while great art can spark that liberating love which says *I want to create,* mediocre art may foster an equally propulsive *I can do that just as well.* Mediocrity often betokens opportunity. Similarly, once most of the demands of form have been scuttled by the young—once the notion is lost that poetry is a craft which, like carpentry, requires a long apprenticeship merely to assimilate its tools —there's no reason for anyone experiencing a potent joy or grievance, the stirrings of a cry from the heart, to feel excluded from Parnassus.

Actually, the rising number of poets, while

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it may create headaches for the poetry editors of magazines receiving perhaps a thousand submissions a week, would seem a healthy phenomenon for at least three reasons. First, it may help us regain some of the ground poetry has lost within the popular culture and thereby offer poets a re-burnished self-esteem, so that even if as civic beings they do not, with Shelley, believe themselves the unacknowledged legislators of the world, they might fancy themselves a small but clarion-voiced group of lobbyists (like the Audubon Society). A second benefit is that mediocre or even bad poetry can have a salutary effect on very young (especially pre-college) potential poets, a group for whom the sort of poetry they're exposed to may be less important than the mere fact of their being exposed to poetry at all. This is a group in whom one cannot reasonably hope to instill a discerning love of what's good, but one can perhaps engender an embracing excitement about poetry that will in time lead to critical refinement. Third, a larger number of poets would seem to increase the likelihood (as in that familiar, though here perhaps unflattering, image favored by students of statistics: monkeys pecking randomly at typewriters) of durable, rewarding poems being written.

The diffusion of poetry, too, presents theoretical advantages. It would seem to increase the chance of a poet's finding useful models and a natural voice. A dominant poetic form or group of forms (rhymed pentameter, say) can squelch a great many poets not temperamentally suited to such strictures. One might reply that genius finds its own forms and surmounts the obstacles of pervading fashion—one might even erect a plausible definition of genius on such a premise—but surely not all great poems are written by geniuses and many great poems will be lost when a charmingly wayward muse is hitched up (by a sort of arranged marriage) to an autocratic prosody. Diffusion would seem to offer a utopian community where everyone practices what he or she does best.

In any case, diffusion would appear to be an inevitable and a lasting condition of the American poetry scene. Fashions will rise and fall, but it's extremely difficult to picture all of our wildly disparate schools and tastes again converging. It is as if after the big bang of modernism and its aftereffects the drifting bodies have finally moved too far apart, lack sufficient mass and centripetal gravity, ever to re-gather again around the core of a ruling orthodoxy.

Diffusion also seems inevitable for a second, extremely cynical, reason. A great many well-known poets simply have not worked in form and could not successfully if they tried. Ungainliness—a simple lack of professionalism—would immediately show itself. Formlessness (ostensibly an avant-garde impulse) may, then, actually be kept alive by conservatism in its most basic sense—conservation of the self, the preservation of one's reputation in the poetry scene.

What is so surprising about this diffusion, whether viewed as ultimately benign or merely inevitable, is how narrow on examination it turns out to be, especially as manifested in our college writing programs. Rarely is it Chaucer or Milton or Pope or Dickinson or Tennyson to whom such classes turn, but almost always a host of mediocrities risen since World War II, most of them theoretically progeny of William Carlos Williams (insofar as he can be read, falsely, as an endorser of plain-spoken disorder). While diffusion ideally ensures individuality, we find instead dozens and dozens of interchangeable tenured Blakes, visionaries without vision, who, having set up campus satraps, are continually venturing forth for drearily unproductive workshops, symposia, conferences. So goes the business of teaching poetry . . .

Admittedly, the poetry teacher occupies a problematic position, for the writing of poetry, despite the exploding population of poets, represents an increasingly "unnatural" practice. There was a time when poets might naturally, as a part of their culture, be steeped in verse, a time when anonymous ballads could flourish and perhaps even help a society find and define itself. In

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recent years, a number of poets and critics (notably Randall Jarrell, Richard Wilbur, W. H. Auden, George Steiner) have written fine, elegiac pieces about this decline, whose implications are enormous, minatory, and obscure. It is clear, however, that today, when that steeping process is no longer naturally imposed, young people who wish not merely to read but actually to absorb someone like Pope, so that lines will volley unexpectedly to mind, must perform an arduous, solitary task. According to a romantic view of poets (and when poets are thought of at all it is usually romantically), this task will be accomplished almost effortlessly, as the young poet, driven by a voracious love of poesy, engorges every stanza and line he can put his hands upon. It probably *is* love, as much as anything, that motivates the apprentice poet, but the romantic view fails to consider that an elementary mastery of this particular craft requires work of a decidedly onerous variety. The young poet who has spent an afternoon seriously grappling for the first time with, say, the cruxes and quibbles of the Shakespeare sonnets is apt to wind up feeling that, like his counterpart the apprentice carpenter, he has splinters in his fingers and sawdust in his lungs.

Ours is a clangorous and increasingly violent age, and the art of poetry, in all its subtleties and near-fatal unsexiness, is easily lost in the din and jostle. It will take years for any young poet who has spent his share of time at the movies, where knifings and garrotings and chain-saw eviscerations are served up with such ferociously unblinking exactitude, or at rock concerts where the very walls are set to shuddering, to appreciate the delicate but prodigious violence packed into a sonnet like Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," with that central image of horror: ". . . and in their ancient fold/Slain by the bloody Piemontese, that rolled/Mother with infant down the rocks." (Palgrave in his *Golden Treasury* called this "the most mighty Sonnet in any language known to the Editor.") And years to understand how a sonnet like Frost's "Design" is both presenting a wittily terrifying view of destiny and prosodically raising the stakes, doing Milton one better, by not only meeting all the rigid constrictions of the Miltonic sonnet form but imposing a further obstacle, the use of one of the same rhyme-sounds ("ite") in both the sestet and octet:

> I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
> On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
> Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
> Assorted characters of death and blight
> Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
> Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
> A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,
> And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
>
> What had that flower to do with being white,
> The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
> What brought the kindred spider to that height,
> Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
> What but design of darkness to appall?—
> If design govern in a thing so small.

With a lucid, colloquial diction ("plain American which cats and dogs can read," in Marianne Moore's phrase), Frost has gone fourteen lines with hardly a break in the pentameter and with the employment of but three rhyme-sounds. Actually, at one point Frost contemplated writing this much-revised sonnet with even fewer rhyme-sounds. Given his awesome technical proficiency, he probably could have accomplished this, but perhaps to the detriment of the poem's music and emotional impact. Here is another fruitful tension—that between visceral force which ever seeks to loosen formal constraints and the technician's perverse urge to tighten them—whose appreciation requires years of study.

Even if the culture itself does not steep the young poet in poetry, he or she may be fortunate enough to grow to poetic adulthood in an era when form flourishes. Perhaps one of the reasons why so much accomplishment has come from American poets

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born in the 1920s (Anthony Hecht, Donald Justice, James Merrill, W. D. Snodgrass, Richard Wilbur, the late James Wright—and again this but begins the list) is that they had the good fortune to begin their careers during the Forties and Fifties, when an orthodoxy of formal verse obtained. This period is often criticized as sterile, and doubtless in some of their work formalism has stunted the soul of a potentially fine lyric, but surely it was advantageous for them to train in the same basic tools as the titans of English verse. These are a generation of poets who have "gone to school." One cannot read a poem like Richard Wilbur's "'A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness,'" written while he was still some years short of thirty, without reflecting that here is someone who purely in terms of craftsmanship has mastered a great deal. In twenty-eight lines he manages articulately to state a philosophical position on the dilemma of the spirit/body conflict; to enlist in support the prose of Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth century poet and theologian from whose *Centuries of Meditation* he draws the title; to cast a fresh and lively language into the matrix of one of the hoariest poetic forms in English verse, the ABAB quatrain. In the first fourteen lines he portrays the spirit's inclination toward the deserts of ascetic withdrawal; at the midpoint, the fifteenth line, the tone shifts from description to exhortation, the verbs from declaratives to imperatives; and in the closing eleven he openly urges the spirit to "turn back," to enter the world fully:

> Turn, O turn
> From the fine sleights of the sand, from the
> long empty oven
> Where flames in flamings burn
>
> Back to the trees arrayed
> In bursts of glare, to the halo-dialing run
> Of the country creeks, and the hills' bracken
> tiaras made
> Gold in the sunken sun,
>
> Wisely watch for the sight
> Of the supernova burgeoning over the barn,
> Lampshine blurred in the steam of beasts,
> the spirit's right
> Oasis, light incarnate.

Note how the form is jerked deftly awry by the swallowed final rhyme of "barn"/"incarnate." How the cool scientific nuances of "supernova" brilliantly contrast with the hinted reference to that ancient image of the star over Bethlehem; how directly yet subtly "Wisely" evokes the Three Wise Men; how the reference to Christ's birth—the Incarnation that is our most potent and poignant image of the Spirit's embrace of the Material—at once broadens the poem's argument and concords so sweetly with the philosophy of Traherne himself. Wilbur has not only gone to school, he has proven himself a star pupil, and this training gives his work an amplitude very few living poets can match. (One might lightly, affectionately note that while the slight misquoting of Traherne in Wilbur's title is probably an act of poetic license, it may show that at that school which he attended Wilbur did not study transcription.)

Yet the poet who has not gone to school suffers more than a narrowing of the breadth of his own verse. His critical faculties are truncated. A crucial understanding of the past is lost. Under normal circumstances, the poet can offer a unique critical vantage. He is apt to understand better even than a far more erudite scholar a poem's *construction*. The poet empathetically senses which line in a wobbly heroic couplet has engendered the other; understands why a particular stanzaic pattern may have been selected, and even which stanza might have been the germ whence the pattern grew; knows firsthand how the paucity of English rhymes (especially for such much-used words as "self," "God," "truth") may unwittingly bend the flow and sense of a lyric; distinguishes between cases where "cheating" on formal requirements derives from felt necessity, and where from a deliberate, fine rebelliousness. Of course the poet has this special insight only if he has worked with these

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forms himself. Poets tend to resent, often rightfully, being reviewed by non-poet critics, who may not fully compass the actual ways a poem is constructed; but having once sacrificed a first-hand knowledge of poetic form, these poets themselves are, when passing judgment on the formal masters of the past, in precisely the same position as the non-poet critics they resent. The poet has lost that craftsman-to-craftsman affinity which is his special contribution to the ongoing evaluation and reappraisal of English-language verse. This loss seems especially grave when considered against the much diminished role verse now plays in the lives of the general populace, whose poetic tastes and sympathies might once have been expected to perform a preserving, archival function. If today poets themselves do not maintain an intimacy with formal technique, who can we expect will do so?

The exploding population of poets, the dizzying diffusion, the sense of open opportunities—clearly these conditions will little profit us so long as a belief persists that a person who is not a decent prosodist can be a decent poet. Or so long as we fail to recognize that metrical illiteracy is, for the poet, functional illiteracy. To write a competent Miltonic sonnet—not even a good one, but merely one which satisfies formal requirements without relying on padding or wrenched syntax or archaic inversions—is a surprisingly difficult undertaking. Surely all poets ought to know this, even if not all critics do.

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Music

Getting on the record

by Samuel Lipman

Once there was a time when recording was in flower. No longer a toy, but not old enough to be predictable and boring, the phonograph was seen as a unique repository of musical greatness, protected against the ravages of time by preservation on shellac discs. These noisy and imperfect replicas of live performances served for countless sensitive souls as the stimulus of fantasies both aesthetic and personal. What Thomas Mann wrote in *The Magic Mountain* about Hans Castorp's discovery of the phonograph summed up what a whole generation felt about—and through—this primitive technological marvel:

> The carrying power of this ghostly music proved relatively small. The vibrations, so surprisingly powerful in the near neighborhood of the box, soon exhausted themselves, grew weak and eerie with distance, like all magic. Hans Castorp was alone among four walls with his wonder-box . . . . Those singers male and female whom he heard he could not see, their corporeal part abode in America, in Milan, Vienna, St. Petersburg. But let them dwell where they might, he had their better part, their voices, and might rejoice in the refining and abstracting process which did away with the disadvantages of closer personal contact, yet left enough appeal to the sense to permit of some command over their individuality.

For such magic to exist, there must always be magicians. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the phonograph's magicians were the inventors of the process itself; what they recorded—whistlers, maudlin ditties, dialect routines—was hardly as important as the fact that it was recorded at all. But with the new century came a new era in phonographic musicality. With Caruso's first discs for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company Ltd. in 1902, sound recording came of age.

All the world now knows the name of Caruso. Beefed-up and de-scratched by the latest electronic treatment, his records still fill the corporate coffers of those companies who had the foresight to get him on wax. The requisite vision for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company came from Fred Gaisberg, a young American present in Washington, D.C., at the birth of the flat recording disc (as opposed to Edison's cylinder). In 1902, talent scouting in Milan for his English bosses, Gaisberg signed Caruso in defiance of a home-office veto on the whole project and entered phonographic history as the first real producer of art music.

Until recently we knew rather more about Gaisberg than we did about any of his successors. In 1942, rich in honors even if borne down by cardiac infirmities, he published a rambling book of memoirs, *The Music Goes Round*. In 1976, the English critic Jerrold Northrop Moore brought out a biography of Gaisberg called *A Matter of Records*. Both books project an appealing

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picture of an unassuming but firm fellow cast among giants.

Giants they indeed were. They included tenor Francesco Tamagno, who created the title role in Verdi's *Otello,* part of which he sang for Gaisberg's clumsy machinery in 1903. In 1905 and again the next year Gaisberg recorded Adelina Patti, whose fabled career as a diva went back to the 1860s. Others whom Gaisberg snared for the early phonograph recording were Ignace Paderewski, singers Nellie Melba, John McCormack, Feodor Chaliapin, and Mattia Battistini, and conductor Arthur Nikisch. In between bouts of headhunting for famous artists, Gaisberg traveled to India and Japan, recording local color; he often went to prerevolutionary Russia as well, both to record the flourishing Russian school of operatic singers and to oversee his employers' business affairs.

Important as were Gaisberg's activities during the acoustic era—the years before the introduction, in 1925, of the electrical recording process still in use today—his work thereafter is more relevant to our present musical life and also more musically valuable. The late 1920s were a time of great Wagner singing, and the records Gaisberg made at this time document the work of those who remain today the ideal interpreters of this demanding music: Friedrich Schorr as Wotan and Hans Sachs, Frida Leider as Brünnhilde and Kundry, and Lauritz Melchior as Siegfried, Parsifal, and even Walther (a role he never sang in the opera house).

Except for the career of Kirsten Flagstad, the golden age of Wagnerian vocalism was as short-lived as it was glorious. Even so, Gaisberg continued to go from strength to strength. In the 1930s he recorded almost the entire repertoire of the pianist Artur Schnabel, including both Brahms concertos, several Schubert sonatas, all the Beethoven concertos, variations, and sonatas. He recorded as well three Mozart operas, *The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Cosi fan tutte,* and even Mahler's Ninth Symphony in a live performance by Bruno Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic that took place just two months before the *Anschluss.* As Gaisberg points out in his memoirs, his recording diary for the month of February 1939 alone included—in addition to Schnabel—such artists as Fritz Kreisler, Adolf Busch, Alexander Brailowsky, and Andrés Segovia. After his retirement in 1939, Gaisberg continued to scout artists for EMI, the successor of his English employers; his last accomplishment was to sign for the company the marvelously gifted though immensely temperamental pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli.

To list Gaisberg's triumphs, however, hardly does justice to his abilities. Undoubtedly, he had a nose for talent, but so do many concert-goers, who show their discernment by buying tickets intelligently. Gaisberg did far more than just pick wisely and back his choices with contractual commitments. He was in fact an *impresario assoluto,* a title given him within his own organization and by implication in the wider world.

Like every successful impresario, Gaisberg was ruthless in dealing with failure. In his own memoirs he is too cautious to show much of this side of himself. But Moore, in quoting David Bicknell, Gaisberg's successor at EMI, makes the man's mettle clear:

> Once I went with him to meet a very grand mezzo-soprano, who said to him in a very hoity-toity sort of voice:
>
> "Oh, Mr. Gaisberg, you *must* tell the Manager at Covent Garden—with whom you have so much influence—to engage me for *Carmen.*"
>
> To which Fred replied: "Oh, but I thought that you had abandoned opera."
>
> "Abandoned opera?" she said. "Why, I am the greatest exponent of the part!"
>
> "Oh," he reiterated, "I heard that you had given it up—at last."

With the great, however, Gaisberg saw his proper role as being friendly. Sometimes, friendliness consisted in at least the appearance of abject slavery, as it often must with artists. A passage Moore quotes from the

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autobiography of Landon Ronald, an English pianist and conductor who accompanied Patti during her recordings for Gaisberg, offers one example of the kind of performing personality Gaisberg was so deft at accommodating:

> [Patti] had never heard her own voice, and when the little trumpet gave forth the beautiful tones, she went into ecstasies! She threw kisses into the trumpet and kept on saying:
>
> "Ah! mon Dieu! maintenant je comprends pourquoi je suis Patti! Oh, oui! Quelle voix! Quelle artiste! Je comprends tout!"

Gaisberg seemed to understand that if in such a personality there was megalomania, there was also the very stuff of artistic performance.

Gaisberg's tasks were many. Sometimes, for the aging Luisa Tetrazzini for instance, he acted as an ambassador to nosy reporters; sometimes, as a homely studio photograph with Schnabel in the Moore biography documents, he was an ingratiating host over coffee and cakes. Bicknell described the lesson Gaisberg taught those around him:

> [Gaisberg] believed profoundly that the success of the Company could only be maintained if the artists were generally contented. He rubbed into me and everybody who worked for him that we were—well, I suppose we were first servants of the Company—but above all we were servants of the artists, and it was our job to help them in every sort of way. And he was a living example of how to do it.

Gaisberg himself put his operating philosophy clearly: "In my dealings with celebrities," he wrote, "I have adopted the attitude that be they ever so stupid or unjust I, the mere mortal, must bow down to the god."

What astonishes us today is how little Gaisberg affected the musical outcome of recording sessions. He selected the artists and plainly chose much of their repertory but for the rest he functioned as a kind of simple photographer, reflecting through his primitive equipment what the artist wanted to do and did.

Gaisberg was to be the last non-intrusive producer. The two great figures who came after him were to make their marks on the recording of classical music by spectacularly intervening in the content of the recording itself. These two men were Walter Legge (1906-1979) and John Culshaw (1924-1980). While much of what they did was known and talked about in the musical world while they lived, the recent publication of a book by and about Legge[1] and an extended set of recollections by Culshaw[2] make a new kind of consideration of their work possible.

Gaisberg was an American who lived most of his life in England; Legge was born in England and remained throughout his life deeply English, not least in his ability to combine an amateur preparation with a professional career. Although musically more or less untrained, he could sight-read at the piano well enough to get an idea of the music that interested him.

In 1927 Legge went to work for His Master's Voice (a successor of the original Gramophone and Typewriter Company and a predecessor of EMI) writing what today would be called liner notes. He was quick to see that one way to increase the supply of serious recorded music during the Great Depression was to form societies of subscribers who would put up money in advance to support the recording of interesting repertory.

His first venture in this line was to record the songs of Hugo Wolf, a respected but at that time neglected master of the German *Lied*. This project, which was eventually to involve such singers as Herbert Janssen, Karl Erb, Alexander Kipnis, Elisabeth Rethberg, and Tiana Lemnitz, began with an

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1 *On and Off the Record: A Memoir of Walter Legge,* by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Scribner's, 292 pages, $17.95

2 *Putting the Record Straight,* by John Culshaw. Viking, 362 pages, $17.50

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album of performances by the legendary Elena Gerhardt. Four hundred and seventy subscribers sufficed—a vital one hundred and eleven of them coming from Japan.

Legge went on to organize the Beethoven Sonata Society, for which Schnabel performed all the major Beethoven solo piano music. The first four volumes (of fifteen) brought in £80,000, a sum equivalent to perhaps two million dollars today. Other subscription projects included the Glyndebourne Mozart operas, Bach and Scarlatti played on the harpsichord by Wanda Landowska, Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* played (on the piano) by Edwin Fischer, twenty-nine Haydn quartets played by the Pro Arte Quartet, all the Beethoven violin sonatas played by Fritz Kreisler, and several orchestral works of Frederick Delius conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham.

During much of the 1930s, while working for EMI, Legge served as a deputy music critic for *The Manchester Guardian*; in 1938 and 1939, again without leaving EMI Legge served as Beecham's assistant artistic director at Covent Garden. During World War II he directed the Entertainments National Service Association concerts for the armed forces and war workers. These wartime concerts used all the better English musicians and orchestras. Legge was thus placed, in his own words, in a "unique position to find out who and where the best players were." He was determined that after the war there should exist in Britain "*one* orchestra at least equal and in certain sections, superior, to the best European orchestras. All these players must be in one orchestra—the Philharmonia." For this orchestra Legge wanted no contracts for players, and no permanent conductor. "The Philharmonia Orchestra," he felt, "must have style, not a style."

The orchestra made its debut less than three months after the war ended. Legge soon arranged for Schnabel to play all the Beethoven piano concertos with the Philharmonia, and in 1947 Richard Strauss came to London to attend its triumphant concert of his works. The same year Legge was able to combine his EMI work with the promotion of the Philharmonia by bringing over Herbert von Karajan, perhaps his greatest find, to conduct the orchestra in London. A subsidy from the Maharajah of Mysore, obtained by Legge, enabled the Philharmonia to continue until the large royalties from its work as the EMI house orchestra in the early 1950s allowed it to stand by itself.

By 1951 Karajan had decided to limit his recording activities to the Philharmonia in London. In 1952 the orchestra began to tour in Europe. Legge arranged for Toscanini to conduct the Philharmonia in a 1952 series (there were more than sixty thousand applications for the six thousand available tickets). Though many great leaders conducted the Philharmonia, Legge's greatest (and last) managerial coup was in October of 1954, when Otto Klemperer, famous in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a proponent of the musical avant-garde, emerged at the helm of the Philharmonia as a high priest of Mozart, Brahms, and (especially) Beethoven.

All of this managerial activity has of course long been credited to Legge. What has only recently become clear in detail is the extent to which Legge involved himself in the musical outcome of record-making, something Gaisberg had always avoided. An article by Legge in the English magazine *Opera* (reprinted in Elisabeth Schwarzkopf's *On and Off the Record*) makes clear what his role was in Beecham's 1937 Berlin recording of *Die Zauberflöte*:

> Before we started the recording I had gone ahead to coach and rehearse the singers. We had an admirable chorus of student and young professional singers . . . and I spent untold hours finding the right singers for the three ladies and the three boys . . . Now, more than forty years later, it can be told that one side of this set was *not* conducted by Beecham and *not* played by the Berlin Philharmonic; neither was free when the hall was available and I desperately needed all three. It was Bruno Seidler-Winkler, Electrola's house accompanist, who

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> conducted the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and followed Beecham's tempi and nuances through headphones. No prizes are offered for identification of which 78 RPM side!

A deceived listener might comfort himself by remembering that, whatever else had changed between the recording sessions, the producer had remained the same.

Legge's most enduring artistic creation, of course, was the musical persona of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf who, under Legge's tutelage, became the queen of German *Lieder*. Legge actually first heard her sing unidentified in the Beecham *Zauberflöte* chorus. Later, having received reports of her remarkable talents from soldiers who had heard her on wartime German Armed Services broadcasts, he sought her out in Vienna in 1946; in 1953 (not, as Legge seems to suggest in one place in *On and Off the Record*, in 1952) they were married.

When Schwarzkopf first met Legge, she insisted on proving herself. She wanted, in her words, "a proper audition—two or three hours. I don't want you to buy a cat in a sack and regret it," she told Legge, "and I don't want you to offer me less than you think I am worth." Legge's reaction was paradigmatic:

> Her stubbornness rattled me, and the audition was severe. After she had shown what she could do in her own choice of a variety of arias from both opera and oratorio, I started to work with her on a very difficult little Hugo Wolf song, "Wer rief dich denn?," bar by bar, word by word, inflection by inflection, a song demanding changing emotions on one syllable, one note: it was the beginning of the way we were to work together for the next twenty-nine years. I soon realized that in this unflinching perfectionalism I had found my match. After an hour-and-a-half, Herbert von Karajan, who was sitting with me, said "I'm going. You are a sadist. Don't crucify the girl."

Later on, after Schwarzkopf's success, accompanists too were included in the training process; in a memorable passage from a letter to a music critic, an RCA executive, Legge wrote:

> My wife is going to the U.S.A. on Sunday and I follow twelve days later to extract from an American accompanist some of the sensitivity I squeezed out of Gerald Moore and more recently Geoffrey Parsons. Accompanists are made, not born.

Something of what Legge could do with his wife and with those who were assisting her was possible with other artists as well. Thus, according to record critic and musicologist Edward Greenfield:

> The stage of preparation immediately before a major recording project generally took place at Legge's North London house in Oakhill Avenue, Hampstead. There, in the music room, he would supervise piano rehearsals. It was at this house too that he would entertain all the major artists, and a conductor like Karajan would frequently be staying as the guest of the Legges. That factor alone put Legge on a different footing when he talked to artists. He himself, with long experience of the major areas of the repertory, caring passionately, often had very positive ideas on interpretation. It made an important difference being in a position to state them without giving offense, if necessary to argue them from personal strength as a friend. A positive artist like Karajan or Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau might very well counter what Legge suggested, but Legge's word, particularly if it had a bearing on the presentation of an interpretation on record as such, was not easily ignored.

As often happens with a man so used to getting his own way, a time came when even successful autocratic behavior found its limits. In the early 1960s some control of the Philharmonia passed from Legge into the hands of London's Royal Festival Hall; competing orchestras won away some of the orchestra's key players. EMI, beguiled by the profit stream generated by the Beatles, began to lose interest in classical recording in general and the Philharmonia in particular.

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Legge decided to resign from EMI so that he could find work for the orchestra from other companies; the result was unhappy: he fought with Klemperer, and the orchestra suspended its existence in 1964 despite his efforts to save it.

From this point until his death fifteen years later, Legge was a man without a position. He promoted concerts, he acted as a musical consultant, and he gave advice on a lavish scale. His major recording activity was supervising his wife's performances. At the very end, spurred by the prospect of her inevitable retirement, he was engaged in giving joint master classes with her; on one such occasion, at the Juilliard School in 1976, he made clear the extraordinary extent to which his had been the animating intelligence that underlay Schwarzkopf's great career. As far as his relations with other musicians were concerned, they are best expressed by his witty reworking (inserting his own name) of Wagner's famous line for Loge, the crafty god of fire in the *Ring: "Immer war Undank Legges Lohn"*—ingratitude was always Legge's wage.

Walter Legge's musical tastes had been formed by the glittering albeit fast fading world of interwar celebrity culture. By contrast, such an education was largely denied to Legge's only real competitor in the modern European world of record producing, John Culshaw.

Culshaw came to music through childhood piano lessons. His struggles at the piano provided a direct road to records:

> [Playing] the simplest piece gave me no reward compared with the experience of hearing it played by a great pianist, which in turn produced a severe inhibition: I lost my nerve if I had to play in front of anyone else. You don't want to hear *me* struggling with it, I wanted to say; let me play you a record by Cortot or Schnabel or Backhaus, which will show you what the music is really all about.

Whereas Legge had come of age in the audience of concert halls and opera houses in London and on the Continent, Culshaw, almost twenty years younger, came of age as a crew member in the wartime British Royal Naval Air Service. From flying and from the new technology of radar he learned to think technologically; he also studied music in his spare time.

Upon demobilization, Culshaw worked as a writer on the fringes of the recording world. By 1946, he had found a job with Decca writing short biographies of their classical artists. Except for one short interval spent working for Capitol Records, he was to stay with Decca until 1967. On their behalf Culshaw changed, not the way artists performed on records, as Legge had, but rather the way the records they made *sounded*.

Culshaw's Decca was indeed a far cry from Legge's EMI. In the classical recording industry, no less than in the book publishing industry, the greatest riches reside in a backlist. EMI, now including within itself both HMV and (English) Columbia, owned the treasures of the German Electrola catalogue, and by marketing agreements it had access to all that had been produced in the United States by RCA Victor and (American) Columbia. Not only were the greatest performers of the past on the EMI backlist; at the end of World War II it had available to it the services of the most distinguished contemporary soloists, conductors, and ensembles of the day.

Decca had virtually no classical backlist. Their roster included only well-known names: the conductors Enrique Jordá, Karl Rankl, Ernest Ansermet, pianists Clifford Curzon and Georg Solti (not yet a conductor), violinists Ida Haendl and Georg Kulenkampff, and singers Paul Schöffler and Peter Pears (along with Pears's long-time associate Benjamin Britten). As worthwhile as these artists might be, their work hardly placed Decca in a position to compete with EMI.

But Decca had an ace up its sleeve—not musical but technological. It has since became famous as FFRR—Full Frequency Range Recording. Developed as an outgrowth of Decca's wartime work on subma-

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rine detection, FFRR brought a new realism, presence, and clarity to sound recording. At first, the benefits of this new technology were limited by the inherent defects of the 78 RPM discs then in use. All this was changed by Columbia's introduction of the long-playing record in 1948; by 1949 Decca was marketing the quiet new discs, each containing as much music as five of the old noisy 78s, in America through its new subsidiary, London Records. Here, then, was the marketing window for both Europe and the United States. Symphonies, full-length operas, the complete works of composers—all these were clearly and brilliantly reproduced with few side breaks. The whole process was helped along significantly by concurrent introduction of easily spliced magnetic tape for the master recording.

Because of EMI's initial hesitation over the introduction of the LP, Decca got the jump on the market in England and in Europe; in the United States, RCA too made EMI's mistake, and Decca/London found itself with only American Columbia as a major competitor. Decca expanded, and Culshaw, now a producer, found himself increasingly responsible for the recording sessions of such conductors as Sir Malcolm Sargent, George Szell, and Solti, whose star was on the rise. In 1951 Culshaw worked on the now classic recording of Hans Knappertsbusch's live performances of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth.

Whatever the merit of the work Culshaw did at this time, it paled by comparison with what he was to accomplish after the introduction of stereophonic recording in the late 1950s. This new process completed the sonic revolution that had begun with FFRR, the LP, and magnetic tape. Recorded sound could now be heard to come from different points in a room; musical transparency and a concert hall atmosphere were audible as well. Culshaw was among the first producers to realize the importance of stereophony for the recording of opera, and to understand fully just how traditional procedures at recording sessions would have to be altered to give the illusion of a live performance.

Culshaw made experiments in this direction with the Flagstad/Knappertsbusch recording of Act I and the Flagstad/Solti recording of Act III of *Die Walküre* in 1957. But these were only first steps toward his real goal: the first complete recording of Wagner's *Ring*. For this project he enticed Kirsten Flagstad, perhaps the greatest Brünnhilde ever and by this time at the end of her long career, to sing Fricka in *Das Rheingold*. To this representative of the musical past he added as the conductor the man who would become his own choice as the great Wagner conductor of the 1960s and beyond, Georg Solti. He chose the Vienna Philharmonic not only because it was the brightest jewel in Decca's orchestral crown, but also because it was undoubtedly the best orchestra in the world with day-to-day experience of playing Wagner in the opera house. In each of the four operas the casts were the best available; in Birgit Nilsson, Culshaw cast the only post-war Brünnhilde worthy of being spoken of in the same breath with Flagstad.

It is a measure of Culshaw's achievement that now, eighteen years after the conclusion of the project, the clear musical virtues of the Decca *Ring* still seem outweighed by Culshaw's contribution as producer. He used modern stereophonic techniques to provide direction and movement to the music and to isolate performers in special acoustical environments suggesting balances and timbres impossible in live performance; he created ear-catching non-musical sound effects and crowd noises as well. In this way Culshaw fashioned a *Ring* which exists only on records. His book on the making of the Decca recording, *Ring Resounding,* tells the whole story, and remains essential reading for an understanding of Culshaw's craft.

Culshaw's *Ring*, much to the surprise of his employers, was a huge commercial and critical success. After *Das Rheingold* came out in 1959, he was emboldened to record Richard Strauss's *Salome* and *Elektra* (both with Nilsson, Solti, and the Vienna Philharmonic) in a similar way. Decca's marketing experts called the acoustical result "SonicStage." Some leading critics now

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objected to Culshaw's work. In a notable article in *High Fidelity,* Conrad L. Osborne accused Culshaw of a "violation" of *Elektra* through his acoustical interventions. Culshaw defended himself against this accusation, but for many music lovers the mud stuck.

Culshaw's memoirs are remarkably free of any bitterness toward this kind of reaction to his work. Much more pervasive in the book—and it seems to be a theme in the ruminations of later producers, including both Legge and Toscanini's producer, Charles O'Connell—is a tone of bitterness toward artists and higherups in corporate management. On the evidence of *Putting the Record Straight,* Culshaw was afflicted with a stupid tenor who couldn't get his words right and a great tenor who drank himself to death; his employers, in their shortsightedness and greed, emerge from his description as characters out of the monster and dwarf cast of the *Ring.*

So in the end Legge's joke about the ingratitude he suffered applies also to Culshaw. In 1967 Culshaw left Decca and went to the BBC, where he served as director of music for television. After 1975 he worked as a writer, adviser, and free-lance recording producer. He contracted hepatitis in 1979 while on a consulting trip to Australia, and in March of 1980 he died.

Death affects only record producers and other living things; recordings live on, defying time and decay. By the magic of which Mann spoke, we can now compare the work of Gaisberg, Legge, and Culshaw. What can be said about the value of the quite different work of these quite different men?

Sadly—and it is a conclusion one feels sure none of these producers would object to—it is the quality of the performer, not the quality of the recording procedure, that counts when the historical record is tallied. Gaisberg's artists were the very stuff of legend; their fortunes were made in concert hall and opera house. From Caruso and Patti to Beecham and Schnabel, they learned their art before a living, immediately reacting public. Gaisberg's task was to make them feel good, and to ensure that his employers made money in the process. As a result of his labors a period that may well have been only a silver age of musical performance became most assuredly a golden age of musical recording.

Legge, of course, somewhere saw recordings as a kind of replacement for musical performance on stage. He described how artists should view records:

> After the war I found in Schwarzkopf, Karajan, and [Dinu] Lipatti (to mention but three) ideal and incurable perfectionists—self-critical, hungry for informed criticism, untiring and acutely aware that their recorded performances were the true proof of their qualities and their careers.

When the artists were fully formed, as in the case of the tragically short-lived Lipatti, the results of Legge's ministrations were valuable—because limited. When the artists were callow, as in the case of the young Karajan, most of Legge's work has proven eminently forgettable. As for Legge's effect on Schwarzkopf's *Lieder* singing, where he put in the most time over the longest period, the overall result now seems to many cute, labored, and artificial.

A word must be said too about Legge's attitudes in the vexing area of contemporary music. He loathed Schoenberg, and made no bones about it:

> I have sat through most of Schönberg's output without being convinced that he is a major composer—and sitting patiently studying his scores has done more to convince me that he does not deserve that epithet . . . Schönberg's eccentricities were the fruit of his own realization that he was incapable of writing a natural melodic and original line.

Legge was almost equally dismissive of Stravinsky, talking of "the nadir to which Stravinsky has straggled from the apogee of *The Rite of Spring.*" The result of his taste, of course, was that Legge missed an oppor-

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tunity (which his position of influence might have made possible) to record a great deal of contemporary music of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s in historically authentic performances.[3] In this oversight Legge seems more culpable than Gaisberg. Gaisberg at least did what the celebrity wanted, Legge always tried to do what he himself wanted—even when he was wrong.

Because Culshaw arrived on the scene at the end of a great procession of individual performers, it is hardly surprising that overall, his work seems the most timebound. He made, it is true, a valiant effort to replace musical greatness with technological innovations. Just how far he failed in this quest may be heard by comparing his electronically marvelous *Ring*—the best thing he ever did on records—against such a primitive phonographic product as the disc transfer of radio broadcasts of Furtwängler's musically unsurpassed 1950 La Scala performances. One passage deserves special mention: the transformation from storm to the rainbow over which the gods cross to Valhalla at the end of *Das Rheingold*. In Culshaw's version, the climactic ring of Donner's hammer and the answering thunderclap can clearly be heard to come from different speakers, creating an effect that might well match the "real" life of Wagner's imagination; in Furtwängler's performance, one hears everything from the same source. But Furtwängler wins the prize, not because he beats Culshaw, but because he beats Solti in creating the *musical* impression of excitement and then repose contained in the notes.

The classical recording business is now in a parlous state. Here in the United States, CBS and RCA, for many years our two great companies, have practically ceased to make domestic large-scale recordings; CBS has now even given up its exclusive and long-standing contract with the New York Philharmonic. Abroad, power lies in the hands of a colossus uniting Deutsche Grammophon and Philips on the Continent with Decca in England; this merger, because it involves Decca's American subsidiary, London Records, has resulted in a further contraction of the available repertory in this country. The highly trumpeted digital recording has proven both slow in coming and remarkably insignificant once it has arrived. The frontier of new repertory seems closed for the time being, and the frenzied drive to redo the performances of older artists in new technology seems to have aroused little interest either.

Is this, then, a time for a new Gaisberg, Legge, or Culshaw? Perhaps so; talent does tend to create its own employment. But the odds rather seem to favor a continuation of the downhill curve we have been following for so many years—at least until we have new music capable of arousing a public demand for its recording and new performing artists whose individuality and power have been amply proven before enthusiastic audiences. Until then, we can always read about—and listen to—the past.

3 Culshaw—although hardly a fan of new music—managed to persuade his superiors, after a battle, to allow the recording of almost all the works of Benjamin Britten in the composer's own performances.

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Architecture

The "Little house" at the Metropolitan

by William H. Jordy

The largest of all Frank Lloyd Wright's living rooms from his early prairie houses has just opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, far from its original site in the exclusive Minneapolis suburb of Wayzata. There, for almost sixty years, from 1916 until 1972, the Francis W. Little house overlooked the length of Lake Minnetonka on Northome peninsula.

The ghost of what the Little house was appears in old photographs, most vividly in a series of stereopticon photographs of the house and its owners taken shortly after the house was built. Some of them are included in the exhibition of the Museum's Wright material that accompanies the presentation of the living room.[1] Most of the views seem to have been taken in the autumn. The house spreads low from its knoll, visible through the frieze of tree trunks so congenial to the repeated verticals of Wright's long window bands. Dried leaves appear here and there on the ground; clusters of them still cling to the almost barren trees. Presumably the annual harvest of autumn leaves and bittersweet must already fill the arts-and-crafts vases and beaten copper bowls inside, the fading colors of the most glorious part of the season enhancing the golds, tans, russets, and browns favored by Wright in his prairie houses.

The big, pavilion-like living room is the heart of the Little house. In the photographs it sits atop the knoll on a brick terrace. Most visible is its hipped roof (Wright's favorite prairie roof, with low slopes coming off all four walls to a ridge pole), supported at the corners by husky and complicated piers, penetrated and anchored by a massive fireplace pylon. The entire length of the long walls is filled with bands of windows from pier to pier, overhung with projecting pergolas. In one direction the window bands look out over the lake, in the other on the woods of the rolling six-acre site. Behind the fireplace-end of the living room a billiard

1 The opening of the living room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is accompanied by an exhibition of the Museum's holdings of Frank Lloyd Wright materials, December 3, 1982 to February 27, 1983. This features furniture from his entire career, stained glass windows from the prairie period, plates from the Berlin publication of his work, and Japanese prints from his own extensive and changing collection. The catalogue of the show, *Frank Lloyd Wright at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* is a reprint of the Museum *Bulletin* (Fall, 1982). In addition to information on the objects exhibited, it features essays by Edgar Kaufmann Jr. on the history of exhibitions of Wright's work and by Julia Meech-Pekarik on Wright's activities as a collector of Japanese prints. Regrettably, this new exhibition catalogue does not include much of the specific documentation on the house included in an earlier catalogue, now out of print: Morrison Heckscher and Elizabeth Miller's *An Architect and His Client: Frank Lloyd Wright and Francis W. Little,* prepared in 1973 for an earlier exhibition of some of this material.

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room extends its direction; off this, the library makes a right-angle jog away from the lake; from the library extends, at right angles again, a long tail of bedrooms (facing the woods) lined with a corridor (on the lakeside of the wing). Kitchen and dining-room are tucked under the bedroom wing into the downhill slope, as the only two-story section of the house. Off the other end of the living-room pavilion, a glazed entrance cell is set typically low to magnify by contrast the movement from its squatness into the big space. In the opposite direction, this vestibule joins a lesser screened pavilion at right angles to the big one, which it mimicks in a simpler manner, complementing the dominant partner. From this, a modest stepped and terraced garden works its way down the knoll, petering out in the woods. Overall, from the stepped garden at one end to the master bedroom at the other, the plan recalls a crankshaft, long and linear, with jogs along its length. And down from the terrace, aimed at the entrance vestibule at right angles to all this, pairs of brick pylons with latticed lanterns clinging to them create a deep channel for a magnificent flight of stone steps and landings. They are narrow and shift back and forth between the pylons at the top; they widen to fill the interval and finally spill out in a big pyramid beyond the initial pylon—like a waterfall out of a chasm.

Now that the house has become a "period room," one searches the faded photographs and old records, straining to perceive what was once there and what it once meant, especially to its owners. The photographs show Mr. and Mrs. Little emerging from the house at the top of the entrance stairs smiling, she in a dark dress which might be velvet, her long skirt topped with a lapelled coat open to a shirtwaist front tied with a bow of ribbon at the neck. He is in a tweed suit, his three-button coat tight against a slight portliness, and on his head a slightly crumpled, rakishly tilted fedora. In another view they stand toward the foot of the stairs, facing one another and smiling, her arms held tightly behind her, his hands thrust in his coat pockets, a little stiffly. They are not so much "posing" in front of their house as simply standing before it, taking possession. In another photograph she sits, smiling, on the big spread of the steps, her skirt echoing its pyramid. He moves further out into the woods, leaning against a tree, smiling, hands still in his coat pockets. The family limousine waits at the foot of the stairs. It is a tall box of a thing, properly enclosed for the rear seat, open to the chauffeur's seat, with the boxiness of the body intensifying the insistent circularity of the spoked wheels and the spare on the running board—so "antique" by comparison with the house. And up there in the background the spreading house repeatedly appears, its down-to-earth luxury reflecting its owners' unpretentious and sensible "cultivated" life.

In *Two Chicago Architects and Their Clients,* Leonard Eaton has characterized Wright's clients of the prairie period; the Littles are certainly typical. Born in Illinois, he trained as a lawyer in South Dakota, returning "east" to Peoria, where he practiced law and eventually owned a public utilities company. His wife, Mary Trimble Little, from Iowa, had studied music in Cologne for several years before her marriage. (The big living room at Northome was partly intended for musical events. Wright even designed a piano for Mrs. Little. Its piered and latticed bulk, with a built-in shelf for a bowl of flowers and a built-in tubular vase for a seasonal branch of forsythia or snarl of bittersweet, exists in a drawing in the exhibition. Either it was never built, or, as legend has it, Mary Little rejected it after she saw it.) The Littles were founding members of the Art Institute of Chicago, and it was doubtless in Chicago art and music circles that they came across Wright. It was just such independent, self-made businessmen, affluent from local enterprise and evincing an interest in art, music, and various cultural "reform" movements who were most of Wright's early clients.

Wright had built a house for the Littles in Peoria in 1902. It was a big, yellow-brick house with sizable stable and coachman's quarters to match. Compact by the later

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house's standards, its ultimate source was the turn-of-the-century vernacular bungalow, but so abstracted and monumentalized by Wright, and so stringently generalized from its cross-shaped plan, that it completely transcended the "bungalow" allusion, even though this familiar vernacular source may have made the unusual but "sensibly" elegant design palatable to the Littles in the first place.

In 1907 the Littles bought property on Lake Minnetonka for a vacation house. Immediately thereafter, in 1908, partly for reasons of health, the Littles left Peoria for Minneapolis, where Mr. Little took up his new position as the vice-president of a bank. By 1908 they had commissioned Wright for a second time.

It was an inopportune moment to have approached him. He was in Europe, in the midst of an affair with Mamah Borthwick, the wife of a former client. While there Wright published a portfolio of plates of his early buildings with Wasmuth, the German publisher. Many of these appear in the current exhibition. The publication of the portfolio was a major achievement, whether measured by the significance of the architectural design it displayed, the elegance of its presentation, or the range of its influence. Mr. Little proved his friendship by helping to underwrite the publication. He also showed himself willing to camp on his family's new site (possibly in a temporary house designed by Wright) until Wright's return. When Wright did return, it was, understandably, not to Chicago, but to the Wisconsin countryside, near Spring Green, where members of Wright's family owned hundreds of acres. There Taliesin was born, the first version of his office-cum-farm. Fortunately, perhaps, it was while Taliesin was in the forefront of Wright's mind that what must have been by then a very impatient Little finally got his architect going in 1912.

Using stone ledge in Taliesin, brick in the Little house, Wright celebrated the principal spaces in both houses with pavilion-like rooms similar to the living room in the Metropolitan. He used low couplings and long, linear thrusts, one-room thick with corridors, all on one floor, in order to create the sequence of spaces he wanted. Ultimately this approach derived from the lightly linked pavilion complexes of Japanese palaces; Wright had perfected it in the elaborate project for the Harold McCormick house of 1907, and immediately thereafter used it again in the splendid Avery Coonley house of 1908. Both of these houses were quite formal in planning, but this mode of architectural organization was ideally suited for the flexible, yet forceful, adjustment of Taliesin and the Little house to irregular and wooded sites.

After Taliesin and the Little house, Wright designed only a few more "prairie" houses (the last of importance being that for the newspaper publisher Henry J. Allen in Wichita, Kansas, completed in 1917). With the collapse of old contacts, the move away from Chicago, the restlessness to do something new, and a commission to design the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and then several houses in California, Wright moved on in other directions. Both Taliesin and the Little house then, stand toward the close of a phase in his career.

In 1972 the Little house came to the end of a phase in its existence. It was the old story: too large and too old-fashioned, standing smack in the middle of a valuable waterfront plot. It was up for sale, which meant up for demolition, when Morrison Heckscher, now the Curator of American Decorative Arts for the Metropolitan, learned of its fate, just as plans for augmenting the American Wing got underway. The Metropolitan bought the house and sold the small library to the Museum of Art in Allentown, Pennsylvania, which soon thereafter won the honor of having installed the *first* Wright "period room" into a museum. A bedroom and windows have stayed in Minneapolis and will be installed in the Art Institute there. A band of fourteen windows will soon appear in the new, nearly completed Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (other windows have gone to the museum at Karlsruhe). The Metropolitan

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has some items still in storage from the house for possible sale to other museums.

So the Little house has been scattered like the autumn leaves. How would Wright have reacted to this uprooting of his house? He would have loathed it.[2] (The proud, smiling Littles probably would have loathed it too.) At the time he built the Guggenheim, Wright regretted that it could not have been located in the Midwest. "I must say," he told reporters upon unveiling the original model for the Museum, "that I begrudge New York this great gift, which would fit so well in the great Middle West. But where life is most in need of inspiration and culture is where this new impetus should be found." Now the Little's living room joins the Guggenheim, a few blocks north on Fifth Avenue, as one of the two principal examples of Wright's work in New York. Given the number of their visitors, they will undoubtedly offer the direct experience of his work to far more people than anything else he did.

This heretofore relatively obscure living room, then, may indeed become the most familiar of all Wright's domestic interiors. Some other Wright interiors are greater, but only by a little. This one is just a bit bland. But it works well in the Metropolitan. The few Wright interiors which would have been higher in quality (had they been available, which happily they were not) are smaller and more complex. The immense advantage of this huge room, for museum purposes, is that the visitors' corral can extend well into the room. One can really stand in the space rather than merely peek into it. A second beauty of the room is precisely that there is nothing idiosyncratic about it. This *is* paradigmatic Wright. All the ingredients of the classic early Wright house are handsomely and clearly visible. Here is the huge, pier-like fireplace at one end, with the fireplace opening forced low. Long bands of casement windows run the length of the room, sixteen of them on either side, set under deep, shelf-like planes with transom windows above. The marked horizontals of the shelving—"banding lines," Wright termed them—underscore the basic rectangular shape of the space, against which recessions (alcoves) and projections (piers) can move back and forth. Hence the basic shape is always resonantly present; yet the shifts add peripheral resiliency, ambiguity, and mystery to the space. The banding shelf also intensifies the horizontality of the space, giving "spread" to it, thus striking the keynote of Wright's feeling for the restfulness of "prairie" horizontals. It scales down the spaciousness to human height by marking a perimeter just a bit over head height, and it provides long "roofed" alcoves at the windows—mini-chambers the length of the room—inviting one in toward the windows with their long, cushioned benches from which one takes in the view, not through the staring eye of a plate glass "picture window," but in a cinematic manner, through a series of frames in which the same image shifts ever so slightly as one scans the reel.

Over the windows Wright spun a geometrical web of stained glass. It provides color. It completes the hierarchy of interior ornament with glinting intricacy at the perimeter. It creates a gossamer planar reference in

2 On the other hand, he certainly would have been pleased to know that his room would serve as the grand finale to the series of period rooms in the American Wing. The period rooms from the original Wing, begun in 1924, exist in a three-story box, now located immediately behind Martin Thompson's handsome Greek Revival facade for the Branch Bank of the United States of the mid-1820s which climaxes the big entrance court of the Wing. A Shaker room of 1830 has already opened in the new area outside the original box. Yet to open is a meander of rooms carrying the history of American interiors through the nineteenth century: Greek Revival of the 1830s, Rococo Revival of the 1850s, Gothic Revival of the 1860s, Renaissance Revival of the 1870s, and a large living hall by McKim, Mead & White from the Metcalf house in Rochester, New York, from the 1880s. Subsequent interiors, if there are to be any, must presumably await some future building campaign. For now, the series begins with the Thomas Hart parlor in Ipswich, done some time before 1674, and ends with Wright at 1916.

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space against which outside distances can be gauged. Stretched across the view, this faintest reminder of "inside" works with the projecting pergola over the windows outside to preserve the tension one feels in the duality of "looking out," between the sheltered vantage point and the exposed expanse. The Little house glass is spare compared to the splendid patterns found in that of some other Wright houses (samples of which appear in the exhibition). Undoubtedly, more spectacular glass would have been desirable for this period room, as a demonstration of what Wright could do. But Little wanted a minimal linear pattern with only the tiniest glints of color in his windows. He rejected a more elaborate scheme suggested by Wright. He feared it would interfere with the view of the lake. In fact, for the Little house alone Wright devised a design for the window bands which was not wholly repetitive, but adjusted the leading to provide a framed rectangular area of clear glass across several of the central windows. (From the Metropolitan, the "view of the lake" is a somewhat distracting view of an as yet unplanted swatch of Central Park; the pyramidal bulk of the Lehman Pavilion and the Park's Egyptian obelisk are the principal objects in view. But at least the Little room is the single period room in the American Wing with natural light. Long-term sun damage to wallpapers, chintzes, and upholstery fabrics bars natural light from the other period rooms. Wright's hearty interiors substantially reduce such concerns. Hence, the natural light that Wright especially prized in his interiors visitors will find exhilarating upon stepping into this room.)

The horizontal band at the base of the hollowed ceiling plane provides a restraining rim against which the folded plaster ceiling is lifted, hollowed like an inverted trencher right up into the pitches of the hipped roof. It also hovers, slightly floating but imminent, by virtue of the interval of the space of the frieze, between the parallel banding of the projecting shelf below and the peripheral molding at the base of the roof above. Is the frieze band a bit too wide to maintain the tension between the independence and interdependence of the triple strata of the interior—window band, frieze, and ceiling? Is this one reason for the slight blandness of the room? Mrs. Little wanted a high room for concerts; in fact she requested that Wright push the ceiling up two feet higher than he had planned. As drawings in the exhibition show, Wright also at one time proposed arches for the transom rather than rectangles. It may be that Mrs. Little's desire for a performance hall prevented Wright from using the proportions he would have used to achieve the intimacy of a living room.

In the ceiling itself Wright characteristically uses simple lattice stripping to reinforce the interior decoration. In creating his linear design he exploits the effects from the folded plaster planes of the ceiling itself, from the repeated verticals of the windows below, and from the dimensions of the room, which he emphasizes by alternating bands across the ceiling that stretch the breadth of the space with panels that run with its length. The ceiling culminates in the flat zone for the stained-glass skylights, once more affirming the room's rectangularity—capping it, yet simultaneously floating in a suspended way within it. Sparely but finely designed, the amber skylights bring the sunlight of the windows into the shadowy center of the room by day, while providing the crowning glow for all the lesser lights at night.

The interior is completed by the furniture, almost all of it designed by Wright for the Littles. He initially designed furniture for their Peoria house which they brought with them to Wayzata, where they commissioned more from him. The earlier furniture (white oak dark stained) tends to show slab-like capitals as finishing elements for legs and finials, with moldings and much latticing. Examples are the print stand in the window alcove and the big "Morris-type" chairs. The later furniture (white oak with clear varnish, and therefore lighter) eliminates the caps, moldings, and latticing for a simpler, more open use of planes in space,

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which appears to be more "constructivist" in aspect, perhaps because European designers like Gerrit Rietveld apparently took off from published designs of Wright's work. Examples of this second phase include the big library table near the door (which a sizable plaster cast of the Winged Victory still adorns even as she once did for the Littles), the side chairs with backs as floating planes, and the little table at the far end of the room by the fireplace holding the antique telephone. Using a single extant photograph of the entrance end of the room and a plan included in the exhibition showing the original furniture placement devised by Wright, R. Craig Miller, Assistant Curator in the Department of American Decorative Arts, has provided a sensitive installation (with a few more pots around the fireplace, one suspects, than the Spartan Littles may have used, but with so much to choose from who can blame the curator's zeal in showing some of them off?). What will come as a surprise to many is how harmoniously Wright's heavy, architectonic furniture exists with the architecture of the room, and, even more perhaps, how subtly the islands of furniture are set down in the room, making decisive, geometric clumps, but leaving plenty of space, the one enhancing the other.

The experience, finally, is completed by going "outside," for it is one of the virtues of this installation that, in the confined channel of space allotted to the room, brick walkways to either side simulate the original terrace base for the room. Night or day the entire room takes on the quality of an immense lantern from this vantage point. It is among Wright's strengths as a designer—and essential to his ability to design in such a three-dimensional manner—that cross sections are so integrally an aspect of his work. Here the vertical plane of the wall precisely bisects the horizontal plane over the window band—half of it projecting as shelf inside, half as pergola outside. What one could not see in the original house (which has been altered in the reconstruction), and what Wright did not want us to see, was the sixteen-inch-deep steel I-beam which spanned the length of the room under the roof, from pier to pier. Suspended from this beam, within each of the transom uprights, was a series of steel rods to support the heavy beam directly over the windows, on which shelving and pergola are also built. So the "organic" support of the roof in any substantial manner by wooden vertical mullions between each of the windows was (characteristically with Wright) at least partly an illusion—apparent "honesty" in construction. But he didn't mind stretching the truth a bit to make it more vivid.

Nor did the Museum. To fit this high-ceilinged room into the new Wing required thinning the ceiling slab; a reinforced concrete collar was added around the thinned section (replacing the original steel beams) to prevent those on the floor above from crashing through Wright's skylights. Nor was it easy to light the skylights as Wright had done it, with a few incandescent bulbs casually hung from glass shades. Here the light had to be squeezed into inches and made to look incandescent, with a fanned duct concealed in the ceiling and running the full length of the room to carry off the build-up of heat. Nor would the conservationists in the Museum permit even so hardy a room to go unmonitored for exposure to the sun. As the sun sets over Central Park, a filtering curtain drops automatically to shield the contents in the room; electric eyes bring up the glow of the interior lighting as natural light fails. These, and the bundles of plastic foliage, are some of the ways in which the Museum has extended Wright's own artifice to contrive the "organic."

But to one standing in the reconstituted living room of the Little house, this is all "behind the scenes." What is up front is the experience of a noble room which Wright meant us to have, and gratitude that this fragment from Northome at least found an Easthome.

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Art

David Smith in Washington

by Hilton Kramer

At the time of his accidental death in 1965, David Smith was regarded by his many admirers—this writer among them—as the pre-eminent American sculptor of his generation. Some of us went even further and proclaimed him to be the greatest of all American sculptors, and one of the few American artists of his time whose work could claim a place beside that of the great European modernists. This was not, alas, the accepted view during much of the artist's lifetime, and it is still very far from being the universal view of his achievement today. But the whole history of Smith's reputation and career is a very odd one. From early on, his work had always been lavished with a good deal of praise, but it was not the kind of praise that in those days led to success. Collectors showed little inclination to acquire the work, the museums either overlooked it entirely or settled for minor examples, and no significant commissions—private or public—ever came his way. The dealers showed his sculpture and the critics praised it, but people in a position to spend money on sculpture remained largely indifferent to its quality. When I first visited Smith at his studio in Bolton Landing, New York, in the summer of 1956, almost the entire oeuvre he had produced since 1931 could still be seen there. When he died nine years later, by that time a much-honored figure, most of it was still there.

Part of the reason for this had to do with the curious status of modernist sculpture itself. With very few exceptions, modernist sculpture met with considerable resistance even in those quarters—not very numerous, in any case—where modernist painting was enthusiastically welcomed. (This was a situation that began to change only in the very last years of Smith's life. The so-called "explosion" that brought modernist sculpture to so many public buildings, shopping centers, college campuses, corporate headquarters, and the like, did not occur until some years after his death.) But another part of the reason had to do with Smith and his work. The kind of welded-metal, open-form construction that Smith favored in his work, although anything but unprecedented—Picasso, Gonzalez, and the Russian Constructivists had all led the way in this particular sculptural genre—was not yet universally accepted as a legitimate mode of sculptural expression.

For many connoisseurs, including some who were famous for their "advanced" views, sculpture still meant something that was carved or modeled. Its appropriate materials were deemed to be stone, wood, or bronze. Sculpture like Smith's, based as it was on the methods of Cubist collage and made by joining slender masses of iron or steel into airy constructions that resembled nothing so much as a form of three-dimensional drawing—"drawing in space," as it came to be called—clearly did not meet these traditional tests. It was therefore rejected as a bastard form of pictorial art. As

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late as 1964, when Sir Herbert Read—then the most renowned critical champion of modernist art in the English-speaking world—published *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture,* this benighted view of open-form sculpture was still vigorously upheld as an unquestioned standard. Only in Sir Herbert's muddled text for the *Concise History* was this view maintained, however. In the book's illustrations, which we may assume were dictated, in part, by a publisher with an eye on the American college market, open-form sculpture was given a legitimacy denied to it in the text. (Thus, while two of Smith's works are illustrated, the text dismisses the open-form mode as "a scribble in the air.") The publication of the *Concise History,* though otherwise an event of negligible intellectual interest, may be taken as marking some sort of official, though obviously reluctant, ratification of the kind of sculpture that Smith had long devoted his creative powers to producing. But by that time, of course, Smith's career was nearly over.

Around the time that *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* was being written, Smith's importance was confirmed by another event of even greater consequence, for it took place in the realm of art rather than in the world of criticism. Contrary to popular belief, it is not in the words that critics write but in the work that artists create that certain works of art are established as central to the living tradition of art itself. Perhaps this is what André Gide meant when he once observed, in a passage in his *Journals,* that the best criticism of a work of art is its sequel. In any case, it was in the early 1960s that Smith's art found its fateful and confirming "sequel" in the work of the English sculptor, Anthony Caro.

Caro had earlier worked as an assistant to Henry Moore. During the 1950s he produced a series of bronze figures which, while not in any obvious way replicating Moore's style, nonetheless remained completely entrenched in the massive figurative mode that Moore then represented with great distinction. However we may wish to look upon Moore's own achievement—I certainly regard him as one of the major artists of his time—it was a mode that promised nothing but a dead end for artists of Caro's generation in Britain. At that particular moment in the history of sculpture, Smith clearly embodied a more vital alternative, and it was Caro who acted on this intelligence. On a visit to the United States in 1959, he sought out David Smith at his Bolton Landing studio. This encounter brought a swift and radical change in Caro's artistic outlook. The break with Moore could not have been more complete. Upon his return to London, Caro turned to welded-metal construction and began producing the open-form sculptures by which he is known today, and he took a whole generation of British sculptors with him. Virtually the entire history of modernist sculpture in Britain in the last two decades owes its genesis to that visit to Bolton Landing in 1959.

In thinking about the two David Smith exhibitions that have lately come to Washington,[1] the critical perspective afforded us by these historical developments is very much worth keeping in mind. So, as a matter of fact, is another—namely, the relation in which Smith's work stands to that of Alexander Calder. Indeed, a comparison with both Calder and Caro is virtually forced upon us by what we see straightaway in the Smith exhibition at the National Gallery. For when we enter the main concourse of the museum's East Building, where the Smith exhibition is installed, the single largest sculpture that meets the eye isn't a Smith at all, but the immense Calder mobile that depends from the ceiling of the vast open space that constitutes the central core of this wing of the museum. And off

1 "David Smith," organized by E.A. Carmean, Jr., opened at the National Gallery of Art on November 7, and remains on view through April 24. "David Smith: Painter, Sculptor, Draftsman," organized by Miranda McClintic at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (November 4–January 16), travels in the spring to the San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas (March 27–June 4).

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to the right, reposing on a lintel-like shelf above one of the doorways, is a smaller and somewhat forlorn-looking construction by Caro. (It was bad luck for the National Gallery—and for its public—that Caro produced one of his least inspired works for this unlovely niche.) Both the Calder and the Caro were commissioned by the National Gallery as permanent adornments of the East Building at the time of its opening, and so we must assume, I suppose, that they are destined to intrude forever upon whatever else is exhibited in this space. Their presence proved to be particularly inapposite at the time of the mammoth Rodin exhibition two years ago. But on this occasion, at least, the presence of these sculptures—especially the Calder—turns out to be instructive, after all.

For Calder was Smith's only near-rival among the American sculptors of their generation.[2] Both had seized upon the radical new syntax of open-form construction in the early stages of their work, and at a time when it represented an unexplored artistic terrain. And while neither was much inclined to acknowledge the existence of the other, each in his own way did more to enlarge the scope of open-form sculpture than any other artist who came to it in the Thirties. Calder was far more famous, of course, and to this day enjoys an international acclaim that has yet to come to Smith. Yet Calder's fame is based, for the most part, on the least serious aspects of his work—on the playfulness, humor, and sheer ingenuity of his mobiles, and even in recent years on the wholly trivial *Circus,* which has no sculptural interest at all.[3] Calder had the great advantage of working in France, close to the artists—Miró, Arp, and Mondrian—whose art provided him with the essentials of his formal vocabulary, both then and for the remainder of his life. It was no small feat, to be sure, to turn the language of the Parisian avant-garde into something so folksy and "American," and Calder has been properly honored for it. But there is, all the same, a remarkable paucity of development and even invention in his oeuvre as a whole. Once he had crossed Arp's and Miró's shapes with Mondrian's color and then applied his inspired engineering skills to setting the results in motion, the possibilities of the mobile were completely realized—at birth, as it were. Its size could be increased, of course, and it was, reaching its final, elephantine apotheosis in the overscale work that now hangs in perpetuity at the National Gallery. But conceptually it had nowhere to go. The best of Calder in his later years is to be found, in any case, in the stabiles, which are pure distillations of Arp-like shapes given monumental form. The giant mobile at the National Gallery, on the other hand, is only a monumental cliché—seductive, spectacular, but finally vacuous—and to see it more than once is to be quickly bored with its well-rehearsed effects.

With the sculpture of David Smith, we enter a very different artistic universe. Not everything that he produced—and he was a very copious artist—is a masterpiece. Far from it. There are things from the Thirties and even the Forties in the Hirshhorn exhibition that are derivative, confused, or misfired, work that would be a fatal embarrassment to an artist of smaller accomplishment or a meaner vision, and not only among the early paintings but in the sculpture, too. Yet Smith's failures, even in the earliest stages of his development, are incidental to his strengths, which are the strengths of gravity, intensity, and an unremitting faculty for invention, as well as an overreaching seriousness and ambition. In no other body of sculpture produced in this country is there anything like the headlong pace that is traced in his oeuvre year after year, decade after decade, or a level of realization that can be compared to what we find sustained in his work right to the end. Only in the war years of the early Forties, when the sculptor was obliged to quit his studio for a period of

2 Smith was born in 1906, Calder in 1898. As it happened, both produced their first serious works around 1931—Smith in New York, Calder in Paris.

3 See Joseph Masheck's article, "Calder's No-Fault *Circus,*" in the September 1982 issue of *The New Criterion.*

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factory work, does the pace slacken, and then it accelerates again in the aftermath of the war with a renewed energy and drive that carry him straight through the last two decades of his life.

An oeuvre as extraordinary as this one is not easily encompassed within the scope of the usual museum survey. It needs an immense and appropriate space, with both indoor and outdoor settings and enough variety to accommodate the rapid shifts in tone and scale that are everywhere reflected in the work of the artist's maturity. If it cannot be accorded an exhibition on an exceptional scale, it can only be shown piecemeal —and this, in Smith's case (as in Picasso's), has the great disadvantage of enforcing the omission of some of the vital links that connect one area of the sculptor's artistic thought with another. This is not to say that the individual sculptures cannot sustain scrutiny in isolation. We know from the many distinguished museum collections in which we often see them that this is anything but true. (On the contrary, a Smith sculpture tends to dominate whatever museological territory it occupies.) But it is one of the functions of an exhibition, after all, to illuminate precisely these vital links in an artist's development. An exhibition that fails to do so may have much to commend it, especially when devoted to an artist of Smith's quality, but it inevitably leaves one of the essential tasks unfulfilled.

Neither of the Smith exhibitions mounted in Washington this winter aspires to be comprehensive in tracing the entire course of his development, and so we know from the outset that the great definitive survey of his oeuvre remains to be done. The show that E. A. Carmean, Jr., has organized at the National Gallery is devoted to the years 1952-1965. This period unquestionably represents the artist's major phase. Beginning in the Fifties, Smith produced most of his major work in series, and it is upon seven of these series—*The Agricolas, The Sentinels, The Zigs, The Circles, The Voltri-Boltons, The Wagons,* and *The Cubis*—that Mr. Carmean has concentrated our attention in this exhibition. Unaccountably, he entirely omits the sculptures in another major series of the period—*The Tank Totems.* Which means that even as a survey of the major sculptures produced in series in the artist's major phase, the exhibition is incomplete. And the *Tank Totems* are by no means the only important works of the period to be omitted. The first large stainless steel constructions of the late Fifties that immediately precede the *Cubi* series, and that do much to illuminate the connections that link that wonderful series to Smith's earlier work, are also left out.

Certain of these gaps are repaired, though none definitively, in the very different exhibition that Miranda McClintic has organized at the Hirshhorn Museum. This show has the very great merit of giving us at least a glimpse—and sometimes more than a glimpse—of virtually every side of Smith's talent. It fairly teems with paintings, drawings, painted constructions, and sculptures large and small from every phase of Smith's career, and there is just enough of the major work here to set the many minor items in an appropriate and instructive context.[4] There are also sculptures in bronze and even silver that are nowadays rarely seen. Even more important are some of the early painted sculptures that are not only of enormous interest in themselves but do much to illuminate the unresolved problem of color in some of the later work.

Smith began his career as a painter, of course, and painting remained something of an obsession with him; he continued to produce works on canvas all his life. The problem of applying color to sculpture, the problem of making color an integral part of

4 As a supplement to the main exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, there is also a documentary section, consisting of letters, sketchbooks, photographs, etc., drawn from the Smith papers at the Archives of American Art. For this section of the show, there is a separate catalogue: *From the Life of the Artist: A Documentary View of David Smith* (Smithsonian Institution Press, $3).

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his sculpture, had also vexed him greatly even before the emergence of Color-field painting in the late Fifties, and in the late work he expended much thought and energy in the attempt to resolve it. Whether this interest in color finally contributed something essential to his later sculpture, or whether, on the contrary, it led him astray, prompting him to seek a synthesis of color and construction that forever eluded him, is an issue that has long divided Smith's admirers. My own view is that he finally failed to make color work for him in any truly sculptural way. Oddly enough, his greatest successes with color occur in the earlier painted sculpture, where it is usually tied to a specific theme (mainly landscape). To trace this important issue in his work, however, we are obliged to shuttle between the Hirshhorn and the National Gallery exhibitions with two sizable catalogues in hand,[5] and, even so, we are left with many questions unaddressed.

Alas, the sad fact is that the Hirshhorn exhibition, if not quite a muddle, is certainly a jumble. It is governed by no discernible principle of coherence or even a consistent standard of taste. No wonder that Edward F. Fry, in his essay for the catalogue of the exhibition, simply ignores it. For many of the works he finds essential to his fine analysis of Smith's development are not to be seen in the exhibition, and works that are marginal to the discussion are there in abundance. This is not the way to exhibit a major artist.

Mr. Carmean avoids such problems of selection by concentrating on the work of Smith's maturity. To this work he has devoted a great deal of careful thought, and the critical guide that he provides to the seven groups of sculptures that comprise this exhibition, though strictly limited to matters of chronology and form, is the best thing of its kind anyone has yet given us. Mr. Fry is much better, to be sure, on the relation of form to experience, and even on the relation of form to meaning, in Smith's work. Such relationships are rarely, if ever, acknowledged to exist in formalist commentaries like Mr. Carmean's. But Mr. Carmean is wonderfully alert to the morphology of form in the sculpture, and his work will prove to be indispensable to the future study of the oeuvre.

All the same, and for reasons having nothing to do with the selection of the sculpture or the quality of Mr. Carmean's ideas, the National Gallery exhibition is not a very happy occasion either. Awful as it is to have to say it, the East Building is not a place where Smith's sculpture—or, indeed, judging from the experience of both the Smith and the Rodin shows, any sculpture—can be effectively or even intelligibly exhibited. Different as the East Building is from the Hirshhorn Museum, they are alike in lacking an appropriate space for the showing of such work. At the Hirshhorn, the basement galleries are so crowded that the single greatest work on view—the surpassingly elegant *Australia* (1951)—cannot be seen in isolation from any perspective, and there is no other space in which the work can be shown. At the National Gallery, the Smiths are consigned to so many different sections of the East Building—the lower level, the main concourse, the mezzanine, a stairway platform, and the upper level—that it requires a real dedication to the work just to discover what the exhibition consists of, and all but one of these spaces, the gallery on the upper level, is so totally out of scale with the sculpture that it cruelly diminishes our experience of it. It is a terrible commentary on the museum architecture of the Seventies that in neither of these buildings is there a sympathetic place for exhibiting precisely the kind of twentieth-century art they were designed to house. Smith's sculpture will no doubt survive these museological misfortunes. Yet an important opportunity to come to terms with this crucial artist has once again been missed.

5 *David Smith* by E. A. Carmean, Jr. Published by the National Gallery of Art, (paperback, $17.95). *David Smith: Painter, Sculptor, Draftsman* by Edward F. Fry and Miranda McClintic. Published by George Braziller in association with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (paperback, $15).

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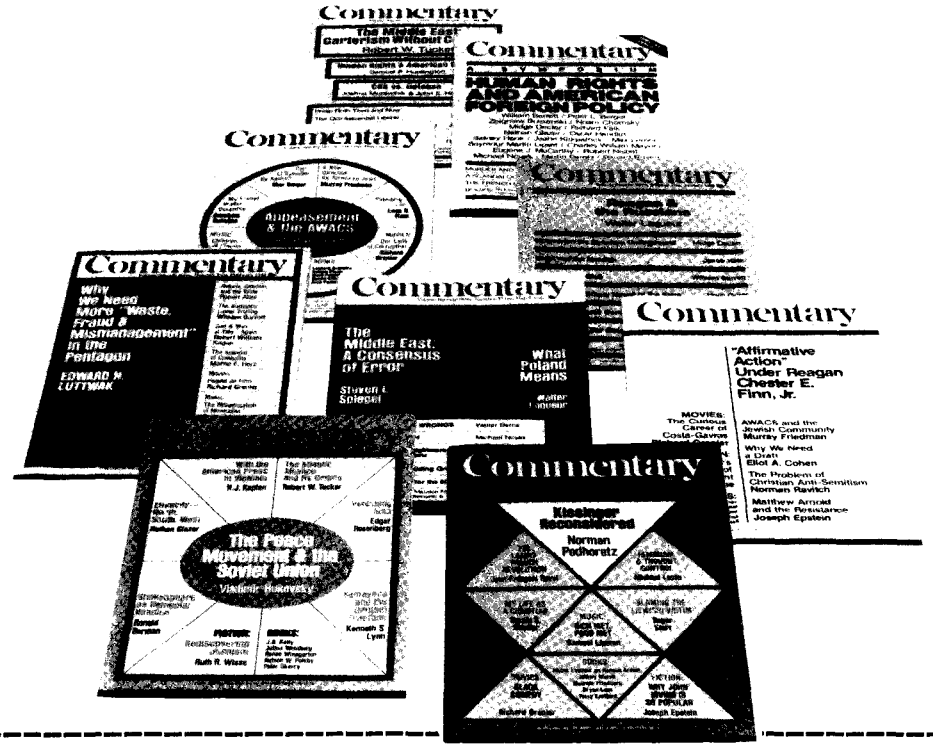
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Books

Sargent's Edwardians

by Dan Hofstadter

In the summer of 1882, a young English critic sent a copy of a book she had just published, in which she had argued that art must yield nothing to conventional facility, to a painter-friend traveling on the Continent. He thanked her in a meditative letter, observing, by way of agreement, that "there are certain times when talent entirely overcomes thought or poetry." The critic was Violet Paget, who called herself "Vernon Lee": her correspondent was the young American painter John Singer Sargent. Little did he realize that he was formulating, better than anyone else ever would, the chief reproach to be leveled at his own work for the next hundred years.

That Sargent soon became aware of such failings, yet remained powerless on the whole to correct them, is not the greatest puzzle in a career abounding in paradoxes. One such paradox may be glimpsed in the contrary reactions of Henry James and Roger Fry to the painter's well-known bravura manner. Writing in 1887, when Sargent was thirty-one, James observed that "perception with him is already a kind of execution"; Fry, speaking out of the van of British modernism soon after the artist's death in 1926, charged that since he had "never felt tempted to probe sensation . . . there was nothing to check his unbounded eye." James meant to acclaim Sargent, Fry to dim his posthumous luster: what strikes us today is that they chose such similar terms.

Other paradoxes spring from Sargent's subject-matter, and from the social and financial "transactions"—Fry's word—which they involved. To the members of the avant-garde, who tended to identify their aesthetic position with a radical political stance, the portraitist's choice of sitters was galling in itself. Had they been franker, they might have acknowledged with Sir William Rothenstein that their indignation at his too fluent style and patrician cast of characters was admixed with envy of an "accomplishment beyond anything of which we were capable." Oddest of all is that the very modernists who claimed that the subject-matter of a painting was irrelevant were incensed by what Sargent depicted. All one needed to know, it seemed, to be certain that a picture was nil, was the title of the sitter and the sum paid for the likeness.

Now Carter Ratcliff has taken a new look at the pictures themselves in *John Singer Sargent.*[1] In graceful prose, and with unfailing sympathy for his subject, he not only retraces the artist's career, adding here and there a new perception, but he also suggests a revised view of the portraits. He begins on familiar ground: we are reminded of Sargent's birth and early training in Florence, of his attachment to his family, of his love for music and art, and of his apprenticeship in the Paris atelier of Carolus Duran. Mr. Ratcliff repeats, without much conviction, the old tale of Sargent's aesthetic descent

1 Abbeville Press, 256 pages, $85

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from Velasquez: one only wishes that he had silenced it forever. It is not merely that Velasquez was not the "realist" that the last century believed him to be, or that Sargent painted in a higher key than the Spaniard, with far thicker color and with much less feeling for arrangements in the grand manner. It is also that there is no spiritual affinity between the two. Velasquez had the sense of tragedy: he could paint what Lytton Strachey called "the frenzy of empire and the doom of peoples." Sargent had none of this: when asked to do the portrait of King Edward, he declined.

One of the first critics to take interest in the young artist was Henry James, and they very soon became friends. The parallel between them has been drawn many times, and at first glance has much to recommend it. Both were Americans of Yankee stock living permanently abroad; both were confirmed bachelors; both moved in high society; and, in their creative work, both were virtuosi with a fastidious sense of form and an awareness of the claims of the past. Mr. Ratcliff has responded to the thematic appeal of this similarity, and drawn it into his essay from the start, though he is wary of pushing it too far, and wisely so. Yet his case for the depth and complexity of the Sargent portraits is based largely on the idea that they embody a Jamesian "tissue of indirections." "In James's novels," he states in his introduction, "each self . . . must be glimpsed through the ambiguities that the author's vision generates as it goes about the creation of its world. Likewise, Sargent encourages us in the sense that selves are fictions to be refined, perhaps reinvented by art." In his chapter on the portraits of the Nineties he takes up the theme once more: "Sargent offers what might be called Jamesian perplexities—the play of social type against personality, of the sitter's inner nature against fashion's constantly shifting ideals."

Mr. Ratcliff, then, likes these much maligned portraits, and comes to their rescue with an unusual awareness of their acuities. He is particularly fond of the one of Lady Agnew in the National Gallery of Scotland, and has put it on top of his book. The flap-jacket picture (I've never seen the original) shows a pretty woman gazing out at the spectator from a cloud of tulle. In his commentary Mr. Ratcliff tells us that "Sargent's manner asserts a claim to nobility on her behalf" and that "Lady Agnew's personality engages in endlessly elusive play against her social type. . . . The economy of his style generates the subtlety of the types he presents—or invents. When he elides the transitions from one tone, one color, one facial feature to the next, he invites us to reinvent these types for ourselves, much as Henry James's narrative voice entangles us in a labyrinth of alternative meanings, then leaves us there to chart them for ourselves."

There is a problem here. Why, we may well ask, would a Scottish peeress need anyone to assert a claim to nobility on her behalf? It is true that noblemen were marrying heiresses (sometimes American or Jewish) for their money, but in such cases the man did not, I believe, lose caste, but the woman gained it: a portrait might confirm, but could scarcely assert, an elevation in rank. That Sargent was playing Lady Agnew's personality against her social type is, I suppose, just barely conceivable, but we cannot discern this in the painting today. For that matter it is difficult to see what this woman's personality was like, beyond her evident conviction of her beauty. As for her social type, it is largely a matter of viewing distance. Doubtless it was clear to her maids. But looking at this picture ninety years after its execution, never having met any of the Scottish Agnews, and uninitiated into the presumed social significance of the properties in the setting, we can hardly imagine the nuances of her social position. How, besides, would the "elision" of tone and feature on Lady Agnew's face (though we see no elision here, but only careful delineation) invite us to anything so grand as a "reinvention of social types"?

Some of Mr. Ratcliff's other deductions are equally muddled. From Mrs. Swinton's nervous expression he concludes that she didn't "feel quite adequate merely as herself

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in an expensive gown," though there is nothing to justify such a conclusion. "These qualms and all they imply about the vexed state of social legitimacy," he continues, "provided Sargent with much of his subject-matter." One wonders what the artist's principal sitters of this period—the 9th Duke of Marlborough and his wife Consuelo (née Vanderbilt), Lady Sassoon (née Aline de Rothschild), the 10th Earl of Wemyss, Lady Ritchie (née Anne Thackeray and daughter of the novelist), the Marchioness of Cholmondeley, Sir Edmund Gosse, Ellen Terry, Eleonora Duse, Henry James, the Wyndham sisters (celebrated Belgravia beauties), and Lady Wilma Pleydell-Bouverie (daughter of the 5th Earl of Radnor and wife of the 2nd Earl of Lathom)—would have made of such a failure of social perception. If one is obliged to consult Burke's *Peerage* for the exact titles of so many of these folks, that is only because Sargent spent some twenty years painting his way through it. That their social legitimacy was suspect in some people's eyes, one readily grants; but it was scarcely "vexed" in their own. When we are told that Sir Frank Twettenham, the governor of the Malay States whom Sargent painted in 1904, "served an empire that justified itself only by economic and military power," we begin to suspect that Mr. Ratcliff is attributing present-day attitudes to the Edwardian upper classes: for not only was the Empire still very much an ideal, but it had already begun to seem bad business—or, if one wished, a form of charity (J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism* was published in 1902). When he goes on to say that Sargent's portraiture "served those who had the most to gain from the belief that the social order is itself an artifice" one wonders to whom he is referring: the Churchills? Henry James? And how would even his newly rich sitters (who weren't, I think, very many) have benefited from the notion that the high society which they had entered at so great a cost was merely something elegantly got up—a sort of folly at the end of the garden?

Though it is certainly true that an artist may explore the ways that physical characteristics, social type, and inner personality are at variance in a single sitter—especially a sitter who must play a pre-ordained and perhaps uncomfortable role in the *grand monde*—there are many pitfalls in the way of understanding such a delicate interplay. For our perception of these qualities in a picture is wholly relative. When Sargent finished James's portrait, for example, the novelist found it most expressive, yet his friend Graham Robertson thought it worthy of someone who had seen him once on a bus, and a suffragette slashed it in Picadilly, not because she disliked James, but because it seemed to her the very image of male domination. What was for one person a remarkable disclosure of his own personality was for another a brute physical likeness and for a third the embodiment of a type. No picture was more often cited as evidence of Sargent's way with social types than his portrait of Asher Wertheimer, in which a businessman stands before us looking formidably shrewd and wielding a cigar. Vernon Lee marveled that Sargent had so splendidly captured the type of "rapacity and vulgarity," while Henry Adams confided that it gave him intimations of "a worse crucifixion than history tells of." Yet Asher Wertheimer was only an art dealer, and a friend and admirer of the artist.

To claim that Sargent was painting his sitters into a sort of ongoing comedy of manners is actually to discount his talent. The power and above all the peculiar breadth of his draughtsmanship enabled him to catch what Fry called "the idiosyncracy of appearance"—what artists term "the character of the model" rather than the character of the man—without any study of the soul. Good drawing can do this all by itself, as Sargent himself always insisted. When he got interested in personality, as he did with Mrs. Charles Gifford Dyer or Wertheimer's wife, the sense of the sitter's social aspect inevitably faded. But this was unusual; usually talent overcame thought or poetry.

Mr. Ratcliff suggests how James's cele-

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brated dictum, "art is a point of view," might be applied to his younger compatriot, who was after all a superb sketcher and hence a connoisseur of vantage points. But James had not only a point of view but also a story-telling power. The corresponding faculty in an artist, the capacity to invent meaningful figure groups, Sargent lacked. This is one way in which the parallel between the two creators is superficial. Another, more important way is that whereas James had a complete vision of evil, Sargent often seemed only half aware that there was such a thing as trouble. Mr. Ratcliff doesn't mention that James fell out with Sargent during the First World War, when the writer gave up his American citizenship in protest against his country's neutrality. Sargent, who never read newspapers, had offended James by his incomprehension of the scale of the catastrophe, which vanished only after he learned that his own niece had been killed in a bombardment. When eventually he became an official war artist, he inquired if there was fighting on Sunday.

If Sargent was the last major exponent of the Anglo-American tradition of public portraiture, he was scarcely well cast for the part. Painting "paughtraits," as he wryly called them, came to play upon his nerves. This is not, of course, because he was politically naïve, though he was that, but because he was forever trying to steer his demon the wrong way. Deep down he preferred the private to the public, the sketchy to the finished, the impression to the illustration, the spontaneous to the carefully designed—but only toward the end did he let the imp take over. The result is that his unimportant work is, on the whole, his best and most modern, and hence his most important for us. In busily exploring the shadows of ambiguity in what Sir Osbert Sitwell called Sargent's "Edwardian shrine," Mr. Ratcliff has neglected what's outside in the sunlight: the brilliant drawings with their incisive contours and strong masses, and the great watercolors, where the most astonishing resemblances are often achieved by color alone.

Yet Mr. Ratcliff's point that Sargent held a mirror up to "modern unease," which he documents with quotations from several critics of the day, is surely well taken: quite a few of the portraits seem notably charged with anxiety, though I think it is personal, not social, in nature. The artist's divergence from both the letter and the spirit of the historical masterpieces he chose for his models was often in the direction of such anxiety. A case in point is *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit,* painted in 1882. Its composition was based on the *Las Meninas* of Velasquez, now in the Prado. Readers will recall this squarish, ten-foot-tall picture, in which the Infanta Margarita, together with her little waiting-maids, a woman dwarf, a dog, and several other members of the Spanish court, including Velasquez himself, are ranged more or less parallel to the viewer. Sargent's design is superficially similar. Four misses of about four to thirteen years are seen in a genteel interior which recedes into inky obscurity, and the gridlike structure of Velasquez's composition, along with a distant, squarish patch of light which he had used, are both retained. Impressed with this work on a visit to the Paris Salon, Henry James wrote of a scene "which encloses the life and seems to form the happy playworld of a family of charming children," and of "the sense it gives us of assimilated secrets and of instinct and knowledge playing together." These terms are felicitous, but they represent, in my opinion, a curious inversion of the case.

The people in *Las Meninas* are in elusive communication: one of the waiting-maids bends forward to offer the princess a drink of water; the painter considers his subjects; a marshal surveys the group from a distance; and even the mirror on the wall reveals the Infanta's mother and father watching over their little darling. All seem to touch and lean together over the wonderful child, conveying a sentiment of tender and vigilant loyalty; and even the perspective of window-jambs, and the canvases "skied" along the walls, suggest a place of harmony and balance. Sargent's group is not like this. There

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is, first, a certain odd asymmetry or syncopation in the placement of the figures. Cut out in their white pinafores against the encroaching darkness, the girls seem scarcely to keep company among themselves, much less to be tended by anyone older. Parted by a wedge of black, only the two eldest—the one lost in shadow, the other looking out at the viewer in a gesture of pert (and not altogether amiable) recognition—seem to touch, and dubiously at that; the youngest muses on the floor; and the last, separated from the other three by a severe vertical, gazes ahead with a passive, vaguely troubled expression. To us, if not to James, the "assimilated secrets" here, the "instinct and knowledge playing together," seem weapons in some half-unconscious game of sibling rivalry and exclusion. But if what we see is not a happy playworld, neither is it a world of tragedy or evil; it is the world of little girls as they often are.

For some reason, no one seems to have noticed that the device of a figure group with one pensive person placed somewhat apart from the others was regularly used by Sargent, notably in *The Misses Vickers* (1884), *The Wyndham Sisters* (1889), *The Sitwell Family* (1900), and *In the Generalife* (1912). It is interesting to speculate whether this device reflects mere journalistic accuracy on his part, or a conscious attitude to human relations, or an unconscious feeling about them, or some combination of all three. In any case, it gives the Boit picture its life—rescues, it, in fact, from certain purely formal failings. There is one painting, however, that it destroyed—though in a particularly interesting way.

That painting is the Sitwell group, to which Mr. Ratcliff has devoted a whole chapter. In 1900 Sir Robert Sitwell invited Sargent to compose a pendant to the six-foot canvas called *The Sitwell Children* that John Singleton Copley, also an American resident in England, had executed in 1787. Sargent said "I can never equal that" but he agreed to try. The Sitwell family, including the three children who would eventually write some hundred books among them, came up to London from Renishaw Hall to pose. Copley's painting shows four children in extravagantly playful and affectionate attitudes. In Sargent's, by contrast, the people stare glumly out of what Henry James might have called a "wilderness" of Chippendale and Chelsea ware; behind is an Aubusson tapestry. Tiny Osbert and Sacheverell are playing on the floor, unminded by anyone; isolated in the middle stands haughty Lady Sitwell in an evening gown and plumed hat, arranging anemones with hands clearly bred to nothing at all; and, finally, cut off from her by a yard of gloom, stands Sir Robert, wearing riding boots, and with his hand on the shoulder of young Edith, then about eleven, who looks surpassingly wretched.

It is, all in all, the picture of a most unhappy family, and why Mr. Ratcliff has not quoted the future Dame Edith on the subject of these sittings I cannot fathom, for she offered a marvellous confirmation of Sargent's feeling for atmosphere. "My father," she wrote, "was portrayed in riding-boots (he never rode), my mother in a white-spangled low evening gown and a hat with feathers, arranging, with one prettily shaped, flaccid, entirely useless hand, red anemones in a silver bowl (she never arranged flowers, and in any case it would have been a curious occupation for one wearing a ball-dress, even if, at the same time, she wore a hat) . . . I was white with fury and contempt, and indignant that my father held me in what he thought was a tender paternal embrace." Elsewhere she explained: "I have forgotten the unhappiness of long ago, and now write of it only because otherwise, after my death, much will be misunderstood. I now feel only pity for my mother, poor young creature, married against her will into a kind of slave-bondage to an equally unfortunate and pitiable young man . . . . No wonder that my mother hated me throughout my childhood and my youth." Of her father she added that he fancied himself "the sole inhabitant" of every room at Renishaw, and that he "walked up and down with a sound like the beat of Time in an empty house." That Sargent was cajoled by Sir

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Robert into using this setting, that he was even bullied into painting the Chelsea teacups in and out and in again, and that the family still looks no fonder than it would have had a passing photographer snapped it during a quarrel—such facts suggest that Sargent's eye had its own sort of probity, and that he did not so much flatter the Edwardians, or for that matter reduce them to types, as he simply registered them. Perception had indeed become a kind of execution.

Grub Street to revolution

Robert Darnton The Literary Underground of the Old Regime. Harvard University Press, 258 pages, $16.50

reviewed by Robert Nisbet

In *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* Robert Darnton introduces us to an eighteenth-century French Enlightenment most of us are unaccustomed to, one populated by *libellistes,* hack writers, and pornographers who, although scorned by the illustrious philosophes and others in French literary society, committed themselves all the same to the values of Diderot, Rousseau, and d'Alembert and carried those values up to the very outbreak of the Revolution. A gamy lot for the most part, denizens of a full-fledged Grub Street, they were as quick to betray one another to the police as to pen a piece of scurrility on any of the leading lights of the Old Regime. Nevertheless, they composed a formidable group in the war against church, nobility, monarchy, and the academies.

Darnton's book is a collective portrait of these *Rousseaus du ruisseau,* or "Rousseaus of the gutter," as they were often called. He has done with the Enlightenment what other historians have recently done with the Revolution; he has studied it from below, through its underground. What has made this possible was Darnton's discovery some years ago in Neuchâtel of an enormous cache of papers from the large eighteenth-century Swiss publishing house, the *Société typographique de Neuchâtel.* It was an "historian's dream," for the *Société* was one of the many publishing houses that grew up around France's borders to fill the constant demand for pirated and prohibited books. Following the leads provided by these papers, Darnton made his way to complementary documents in France—archives of the police, the Bastille, and the booksellers' guild. Darnton's first yield from these researches was *The Business of the Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (1979). Now he has turned his attention to the large number of books of the Enlightenment that expressed hostility to the Old Regime by means of pornography, libel, obscene caricature, and the relentless mongering of every possible rumor or supposition concerning the monarchy and aristocracy. Though we rarely if ever see mention today of their titles and authors in our histories of eighteenth-century French literature, the works of this underground were very widely read by the French of all classes and sections.

Darnton takes us in a variety of portraits and landscapes to France's Grub Street, habitat in Paris of hundreds of *libellistes.* They had been drawn to Paris from the provinces by the glittering reputations of Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau, and others and by a simple desire to become philosophes themselves in the work of spreading the gospel of natural law, rights, and liberty and of subjecting the *grand monde* to unrelenting ridicule and invective. Alas, there was no room for them among the philosophes, most of whom had become incandescent figures themselves in the *grand monde,* in its salons and lustrous academies. Rejected for the most part by the philosophes, who were not eager for competition from the youthful, they decided to carry on the philosophes' war against the Old Regime in their own way—directly, without subtlety or elegance, using the stiletto of libel and the broad sword of scurrility and pornography.

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Charles de Morande was one of the abler writers of the *libelles*. According to Darnton he could bring shock even to Voltaire. He specialized in ascribing to members of the court and aristocracy all manner of sexual deviation and depravity. Thus, in Morande's account, the "devout wife of a certain Marechal de France" prefers the "crude caresses" of her "robust" butler to those of her husband; elsewhere, "The Count of Noail—having taken some scandalous liberties with one of his lackeys," is knocked over "with a slap that kept his lordship in bed for eight days." And at one point

> the public is warned that an epidemic disease is raging among the girls of the Opera, that it has begun to reach the ladies of the court, and that it has even been communicated to their lackeys. This disease elongates the face, destroys the complexion, reduces the weight, and causes horrible ravages where it becomes situated. There are ladies without teeth, others without eyebrows, and some completely paralyzed.

According to Darnton, Morande's chronicle of decadence in high places reads "as an indictment of the social order . . . . He associated the aristocracy's decadence with its inability to fulfill its functions in the army, the church, and the state."

The philosophes' characterizations of these gamy *libellistes* of Grub Street could be savage. Mercier thought them no better than "famished scribblers" and "poor hacks." Voltaire was much more savage, placing them at a level below that of prostitutes and calling them "the dregs of humanity," the "ragged rabble" and "riff-raff of literature." Such invective notwithstanding, Voltaire and others were not above using these *pauvres diables* for their own purposes, mostly by encouraging them (with information and money) to attack in the underground press the philosophes' ideological enemies.

The Grub Street hacks were helped greatly in their so-called philosophical tracts and their various other forms of writing by the gradual disappearance through death of the great philosophes and by the conspicuous

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impotence of the self-styled philosophes who in the 1780s supposedly took the places of the Voltaires and Rousseaus. These latter had also come to Paris in search of fortune through writing. But unlike the Grub Street lot, they had a flair for insinuating themselves into the good graces of the old philosophes and others of importance in French society. Darnton's portrait of Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard is revealing. Suard had come to Paris in search of patronage and "protection" by the illustrious writers of the day, and he was singularly successful. "He toed the party line of the philosophes," Darnton writes, "and collected his reward." He and his wife entertained the notable and were entertained by them in turn. In pensions and other secure sources of state largesse he netted between ten and twenty thousand livres a year.

It is the Suard types that complicate the relation of the philosophes to the Revolution. The great philosophes were dead by the early 1780s. In any event it is a long step from the abstract tomes and articles of Diderot and Morellet to the fierce radicalism that flared up on so wide a front in 1789. Rousseau may well be considered a continuing link between the Enlightenment and the outbreak of the Revolution; he seems to have been read more widely than the others during the fateful decade of the 1780s. But the fact is that in the main, as Darnton writes, "with the death of the old Bolsheviks, the Enlightenment passed into the hands of nonentities like Suard: it lost its fire and became a mere tranquil diffusion of light, a comfortable ascent toward progress. The transition from the heroic to the High Enlightenment domesticated the movement, integrating it with *le monde* and bathing it in the *douceur de vivre* of the Old Regime's dying years."

Enter now the riff-raff. They are, as Darnton demonstrates, the true carriers of Enlightenment values to 1789. The recognized philosophe-successors to Voltaire—who had himself become very wealthy through speculation and investment and had been virtually canonized by the Old Regime before his death—were fat and complacent. No spirit of revolt bubbled in their veins. But the men of Grub Street were different indeed: their minds had been steeped from boyhood in the more revolutionary sentiments of the Old Guard of philosophes; from adversity of every kind they felt their hatred of the Old Regime grow almost exponentially from year to year. Darnton writes:

> And while [the philosophes] grew fat in Voltaire's church, the revolutionary spirit passed to the lean and hungry men of Grub Street, to the cultural pariahs who, through poverty and humiliation, produced the Jacobinical version of Rousseauism. The crude pamphleteering of Grub Street was revolutionary in feeling as well as in message. It expressed the passion of men who hated the Old Regime in their guts, who ached with hatred of it. It was from such visceral hatred, not from the refined abstractions of the contented cultural elite, that the extreme Jacobin revolution found its authentic voice.

It was probably the insensate resentment, envy, and sheer hatred of those above them socially that made anything like a formal revolutionary program impossible on Grub Street. "Morande cried out for liberty," Darnton points out, "and in fulminating against aristocratic decadence he seemed to have advanced bourgeois standards of decency, if only by contrast. But he did not defend any clear set of principles." Nevertheless, in the attacks on the moral depravities of their chosen subjects, starting with the Queen, the *libellistes* communicated a moral order, one easily assimilated by those unable to read Rousseau. "So, if the *libelles* lacked a coherent ideology, they communicated a revolutionary point of view." In the large their message was indeed "gutter Rousseauism." Rousseau seems to have been the philosophe that Grub Street adored. He was, they felt, at bottom one of them; they were merely broadcasting in explicit detail his central message.

But, as Darnton stresses in his chapter on the famous *libelliste* Brissot ("A Spy in Grub Street"), many of the rabble—hatred of the

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Old Regime notwithstanding—were only too willing to become police informers, saving their own necks and making a little money while they continued their work as philosophes of the demimonde. Brissot, who would become a prominent and prosperous editor during the Revolution, held all the correct Rousseauian ideas in the 1780s and burned with all the appropriate sentiments on the corruption of the Old Regime and its need of early demise. But "when [the government] imprisoned him and confiscated his works, he came to an understanding with its police." He was far from being alone in this.

Darnton's primary interest in this book is not the substance of the ideas which flourished during the Enlightenment and made their way to 1789 but rather the means by which the ideas were diffused to so many parts of French society. As he points out, the underground was very important when the police and other agencies of government sought to contain the utterance of heterodox ideas. The underground managed for the most part to elude police and censor. But how? "Historians know very little about the way legal literature was printed, distributed, and read under the Old Regime. They know still less about prohibited books. Yet most of what passes today for eighteenth-century literature circulated on the shady side of the law in eighteenth-century France." And here booksellers became vital to the cause.

In a chapter on "a clandestine bookseller in the provinces" we gain a vivid picture of the significance of such book dealers as Mauvelain in Troyes in spreading the ideas of both the high and the low Enlightenment throughout France in the 1770s and 1780s. It was of course the Enlightenment of the low road that had the greatest appeal to readers. Mauvelain's clients, Darnton tells us, had virtually no interest in theory. "The works that sold best of all in Mauvelain's repertory were the libels *(libelles)* . . . . They resembled *chroniques scandaleuses* in their emphasis on scandal, but they also had polit-

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ical 'bite.' They probed the sensitive area where private decadence became a public issue, and by slandering eminent individuals, they desecrated the whole regime." The word philosophy obviously had great elasticity in the Enlightenment. In a letter from a bookseller in Poitiers to his supplier in Switzerland there is this: "Here is a short list of philosophical books that I want. Please send the invoice in advance: *Venus in the Cloister or the Nun in a Nightgown, Christianity Unveiled, Memoirs of Mme la marquise de Pompadour, Inquiry on the Origin of Oriental Despotism, The System of Nature, Theresa the Philosopher, Margot the Campfollower.*"

One of the merits of Darnton's book is the clarity with which the age-old liaison between pornography and revolt is set forth. As Darnton makes evident, the Grub Street pornographer concerned with salaciously limning the personal lives of the eminent was just as surely working at destroying the foundations of the Old Regime as was the tractarian concerned with court or *parlements.* It is impossible to separate politics and morals, and the uses of moral depravity are very great when the object is the overthrow of a government or social order. Thus, in declaring a majority of the two hundred colonels in France fit only for homosexual gaieties, only able "to sing little songs" and "wear lace and red heels," and in announcing that the "King's confessor was disgraced for having been discovered flirting with some pages," a *libelle* was at once appealing to a traditional moral code and declaring a social order so rotten that extermination through revolution was the only hope for national salvation.

Without doubt the most lasting contribution Darnton has made in this book is his demonstration of just how the Enlightenment led up to the Revolution. For a long time a substantial number of respected historians of the Revolution have poured scorn on the proposition that the ideas of the Enlightenment played a powerful role in bringing on 1789 and the astonishing amount of radicalism found in this first year of the Revolution. What power, these historians ask, could abstract dissertations of D'Holbach, Diderot, and Rousseau, the satire and humor of Voltaire, and the philosophy of nature shared by the Physiocrats and most of the *Encyclopédistes* have in them to carry developing passions of the 1780s to the causes of the Revolution?

The answer is, very little. But that doesn't by any means end the matter. For, as Darnton shows convincingly in this book, many of the central ideas of the old philosophes were gleefully incorporated in the works of the Grub Street regulars, and of one thing we may be sure, given Darnton's scholarly discoveries: a great many people in France read Grub Street's literature. In sum, the intellectual origins of the Revolution "may be understood better if one descends from the level of the *Encyclopédie* and re-enters Grub Street, where men like Brissot produced the newspapers and pamphlets, the posters and cartoons, the songs, rumors, and *libelles* that transformed personal quarrels and factional rivalries into an ideological struggle over the destiny of France."

And when the Revolution began, the inherent conflict between the denizens of Grub Street and the Suards, Marmontels, and Morellets—who had managed to achieve philosophe status in *le monde* and to acquire a stake in the Old Regime—could not be capped any longer. The new philosophes, so-called, were stripped of income and status while the Brissots, Prudhommes, Louvets, and Marats of the literary proletariat took on new and often well-paid existences as editors and members of government. As Darnton writes in the final sentence of his book: "The counterculture called for a cultural revolution—and was ready to answer the call of 1789." Not only were the pillars of the Old Regime that the old philosophes had disliked brought down suddenly, but so were a good many pillars—academies, liberal salons, booksellers' organizations, etc.—that the philosophes had found highly agreeable. Such, commonly in history, is the fate of intellectuals who choose the high road to revolution.

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Worst Possible Ordeal

John Haffenden The Life of John Berryman. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 451 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Vernon Young

If John Berryman had not committed suicide, I wonder, how many readers might there be for a four-hundred-page story of his life?

In his definitions of classical and romantic artists, W. H. Auden assumed dementia as their common condition; the classical artist was "one whose dementia was simply the occasion for his talent"; the romantic, "one whose dementia became his subject matter." Berryman, in that showing, was a Romantic *in extremis* but not unique in the American scene. Convinced that to write great poetry required great suffering and being unsupplied by America, mid-century, with a tragedy of European dimension, he proceeded to stock himself with traumas and compulsions which, if not wholly invented, were at least enlarged as he had need for them, in order to fuel the desperation inseparable from the role of genius. Endowment, he claimed in a *Paris Review* essay quoted by John Haffenden, was the lesser part of artistic achievement—about fifteen or twenty percent! "I do feel strongly that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal . . . . The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him."

Eighty percent unspecified agony and only twenty percent gift; it's a grotesque have-it-yourself formula, but he labored at it and he seems to have convinced a considerable number of critics that his proportions were justified. During the inceptive years of his career as a poet (that is, in the Forties), Berryman was quickly impressed by clues to what Rimbaud had called "sacred disorder," not only in Stephen Crane, whose biography he later wrote, but also among friends and contemporaries whose work he admired and envied and would soon, with no restraining modesty, challenge: Delmore Schwartz, for example, as well as Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell. To increase the pressure that he evidently found necessary to maintain the stress he had long since decided was mandatory for the poet's vision, he compounded the burdens he had already taken on—writing poems and reviews, teaching, trying to be a husband—by adding alcohol and drugs to his scenario. The celerity with which he became the slave of his evening cocktail instead of its connoisseur is remarked upon with surprise by Eileen Simpson in *Poets in Their Youth,* her recent memoir, as well as by Haffenden, who claims that Berryman's heavy drinking started in 1947. He was then thirty-three and this was a key year in his centrifugal efforts to impose himself on the world (the world of Princeton, where he was teaching, at any rate) or to destroy himself in the attempt. (The destruction took another twenty-five years. By 1969 he was a certified member of the chronic-disorder establishment.)

Married to Eileen Mulligan (now Mrs. Simpson), having an affair with a married woman whom Haffenden discreetly calls "Lise" (an affair that inspired for this biography some of the most tiresome pages of nagging casuistry since *Albertine disparue*), teetering on window ledges at parties (a perennial threat of a kind he had indulged in since his adolescence), and constructing, with the help of a psychiatrist, an architecture of Oedipal diagnosis that no doubt appealed to his literary sense, Berryman has emerged, at this juncture, as a monument of self-celebration which neither time nor the brute presence of other mortals will minimize. While writing his biography of Crane, he tries to shock himself by noting in his diary that he was taking dexedrine twice a day, "martinis before dinner; nembutal and sherry after midnight, to sleep . . . . Good God." (Look what I'm doing to myself! *Isn't it exciting*? This becomes the burden of his self-programming thereafter.)

From the abundance of unselective details gathered by Haffenden, I infer that the most conspicuous feature of Berryman's

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personality was not his devotion to life for the sake of art but to art as a road to prestige. And his appetite increased by what it fed upon. He had a towering need for success as defined by others; yet for those others he had a severely qualified respect. As a consequence, his protestations of sorrow upon hearing of the crack-up or the suicide of a fellow poet are bound to strike one as less than authentic. The most damning occasion reported by Haffenden is Berryman's reaction to the death of Robert Frost. He greeted the intelligence (brought him by Daniel Hughes) "with a wide-eyed question. 'Dan, it's scary. Who's number one? . . . Cal [i.e., Lowell] is number one, isn't he?'" Hughes guessed that Berryman wanted him to say, "You're number one, of course," but he did not. Had he done so, it would not have slaked Berryman's thirst for applause. Nothing seems to have availed against this man's importunate lack of inward security. At the age of forty-five, established academically and acclaimed as a poet, he was still coaxing to his office undergraduate girls who would assure him that his morning lecture had been "outstanding."

Everybody loved him is the consensus according to Haffenden, which might indicate that Haffenden played down more negative opinions than he elaborated. (I have heard several myself from former students of Berryman's who found him neither inspiring nor reliable and who were not ingratiated when he attempted poetry readings, for which he was paid a thousand dollars, even when drunk and inaudible.) What most surprises me in Haffenden's treatment of the Berryman story is that as an Englishman who spent ten years collating his material, including eight months with the Berryman papers at Minnesota, Haffenden is curiously unmoved by the cultural inferences of his study. He seems not to have been aware that much of Berryman's intransigent behavior was sanctioned by the anomalous position occupied by English departments in the American scheme of things. Surrounded as they are by a readily anti-intellectual population, their members tend to inhabit a world where reality is forever unglimpsed or justifiably, perhaps, resisted.

While the Department, as such, was not the prime mover of Berryman's alcoholic capers, it did contribute a stratagem which has become increasingly common in academic circles where an uneasy liberalism prevails. Henry Adams once called it "the mucker pose." Not confined to *literary* intellectuals, it involves the pretense that you are less fastidious than your education has in fact made you, demonstrated by a faked "common touch" for fear that you will sound superior to your fellow citizen. This strategy alternates with the prodigy pose, when you force incivility upon others because your talent gives you the right to do so. Berryman tried out both poses without, it seems to me, having had the style to make either convincing. A gross but not exceptional instance of his effort in this direction was his reception of a $10,000 grant from the NEA "for distinguished service to American letters." Three years later, in an interview, this is the version he gave.

> In 1968 Congress voted me a ten thousand dollar grant as part of some Federal Arts program and a reporter called me to ask if I expected to get it. I said "Expected it? I never even heard of the god-damn thing!" And this was spread all over the country and some guy on the floor of the House said, "Why do we give money to these jerks when they've never even heard of the program?" and pretty soon the agency was wiped out.
>
> Well this means that some of my friends and some of the younger people who need it, won't get a very useful 10,000 bucks. So I'm very ashamed of myself.

What is conspicuous here, besides the breath-taking boorishness, is the heedless self-aggrandizement; far from being ashamed, he was delighting in his assumed power to wipe out a government agency with insolence. The assumption was in fact false. The National Endowment for the Arts survived even John Berryman's crass ingratitude, something which Haffenden, usually

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on the alert with his filing cards, fails to point out.

But the generic English department was in no way responsible for Berryman's long-term conviction that he was destined to write tragic poetry because he had a tormented childhood. For years he persisted in the notion that he was derailed for life by his father's suicide (when Berryman was twelve), a belief he was unwilling to relinquish until the year before his own death. Yet he claimed to have been seriously afflicted by so many neighboring tragedies when young that we are led to suspect him of habitual equivocation or of having been so vulnerable as to make his survival as an adult all but impossible. At the age of eleven, when a close boy friend died, Berryman, "awed and terrified, secretly managed to touch his dead friend's hand." Suffering nightmares from the experience, he ran screaming to his mother. In almost the same breath, we are told that he chastised himself for continually being late for Mass. Since his mother relieved him of guilt by explaining the Act of Contrition, since she was the sole supporter of his education in those years, and since she promptly removed him and his brother from a school in which both were bullied and unhappy, it is difficult to assess his lifelong resentment of her, a resentment which Haffenden is inclined to approve. While no outsider can fairly judge such a deadlock of personal attachment and rejection, little Freudian ingenuity is required to deduce (with or without sexual imputations) that Berryman resented his indebtedness to her and ungallantly accused her of smother-love. Or perhaps he envied her prose. Of all the correspondents cited in these pages, she is the stylist supreme. I am touched with admiration for the Ciceronian splendor of this sentence (from a letter to the other son in 1964): "It is a rather hard lot that the only person, thing or undertaking I had given up as hopeless should be my well-loved elder son whose genius I regard with awe and reverence and whom I finally recognize as a sadistic non-member of the human race, with occasional lapses into humanity."

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The sight of a talented man pursuing himself through a labyrinth (without knowing which thread was provided by Ariadne) should evoke compassion. I was unable to rise to that sentiment, partly because I don't share the general admiration for Berryman's poetry. If he had pursued his vicarious agony in the verses he wrote for what was to be *The Black Book of Poland* (1948-1950), he might have equaled the power of Randall Jarrell's *marchen* and war poems. He was unable to endure the painfulness of the tragedy he wanted to convey and retreated to his perennially favorite subject, the pathos of himself. (For me, the "Henry" poems archly exploit a teenager's claustrophobia.)

I wouldn't care to make a law of this, but if you don't like the poetry you don't like the man who wrote it. Nothing in Haffenden's indiscriminate freight of testimonials convinces me that I would have liked the man. Berryman seems to me never to have done or said anything that wasn't histrionic.

How aware Haffenden is on this score it is not easy to conclude. Clearly, while from time to time he braces himself to deplore the poet's self-exaltation, he takes for granted Berryman's importance, else he wouldn't have spent years compiling the book and writing further studies of the poetry. (In this context, he limits his evaluations of the poems to their autobiographical utility.) Eventually I was distracted to the point of peevishness by his mad habit of setting up encounters that promise to be revealing but disclose nothing at all. Once in a while this *apropos à rien* is comical. He tells us that in London Berryman had taken Louis MacNeice to see *Henry VI,* Part II, at the Old Vic. We wait with bated breath. What had MacNeice to say about the performance and what did Berryman retort? Or vice versa? We never find out. *Nothing* ensues! All in the same sentence Haffenden rushes on to add that while in town Berryman called on his former fiancée, "who had remained unmarried since leaving him in New York in 1939." If ever the retort "So what?" has earned a new lease on life, it is in the pages of this biography.

"The worse possible ordeal" for Berryman may have been, at the last, *respite.* In 1969 the complete *Dream Songs* had been published; his alcoholism was by 1971 "cured" and in that year his second daughter was born. It almost seems as if he committed suicide to prove how bleak his life was without insensate behavior and without the crest and ebb of composition under pressure. As Haffenden suggests, he may have feared that he would never write poems to level with *Dream Songs.* Afraid of drying up, he may well have preferred the drama of self-destruction to any solution which might have relieved him of his stimulating inferno and forced him to live with others without envying or subordinating them.

All we *know* is that on January 7, 1972, he walked to the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis and jumped off. In broad daylight. There's a certain pathos in that. He was afraid of the dark.

A marginal "life"

Irving Howe A Margin of Hope. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 352 pages, $14.95

reviewed by Hilton Kramer

The memoirs of certain ex-radicals tend, with good reason, to be written in the elegiac mode. Yet it is a very odd mode of elegy that such memoirs offer us. For what is mourned, more often than not, is not so much an actuality that has perished as a conception of the world that proved to be untenable. This gives to memoirs of this sort a curious air of unreality. Their manifest subject isn't really life, either the writer's or anyone else's; it is dialectic. These memoirs tend, therefore, to be abstract and analytical rather than descriptive or evocative. Just as in life the idea dominated experience, so in writing about life must experience be sub-

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ordinated to the idea. The pivotal events of life are treated less as occasions for recollection and re-examination than as issues to be debated and battles to be re-fought. Experience is denatured in the interests of argument and ideology.

In the case of Irving Howe, who has now written a volume of memoirs called *A Margin of Hope,* this tendency to argument and abstraction is made all the more emphatic by the book's almost eerie reticence in dealing with matters that must, perforce, be regarded as central to his development as a writer. Not only is he evasive and unduly elliptical in telling us the story of his life, but in regard to the one area of his experience that most readers, I believe, are likely to regard as more important than any other associated with his name—his work as a literary critic—Mr. Howe has astonishingly little to say. It is his work as a literary critic, after all, that now constitutes Mr. Howe's primary claim on our attention. It is on the basis of the literary criticism he has been publishing for nearly forty years that he has come to be regarded as one of our senior men of letters. Now it may be that in "An Intellectual Autobiography," as its author calls this book of memoirs, a critic is not obliged to dwell on details of family or personal history. It may be enough for him to speak only of the life of the mind, as it were. Opinions will naturally vary on this question. But what kind of intellectual autobiography do we have in a book in which so prominent a critic refrains from telling us anything of importance about the genesis of the books he has written, about the literary vision that governed them, or indeed, about the *intellectual* vicissitudes of the tumultuous literary era in which he has labored so conspicuously at his critical tasks?

About all such matters Mr. Howe is very nearly silent in this book. Let us recall, then, that over the course of a long career Mr. Howe has written critical studies of Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, and the modern political novel. He has edited anthologies devoted to the work of Edith Wharton, Rudyard Kipling, and literary modernism. He has collaborated in the translation of Yiddish poets and short-story writers, and produced a great many essays on the literature of our time. He has contributed to all the leading literary journals, he has been an influential teacher in the English departments of Brandeis, Stanford, and the City University of New York, and he has lectured on literary subjects just about everywhere. Yet except for some cursory pages on the New Critics and on the literary figures—most of them critics, too—associated with *Partisan Review,* and a chapter devoted to the author's involvement with the Yiddish writers whose work he did much to bring to a wider literary public, *A Margin of Hope* pays scant attention to literature itself. Only rarely and fleetingly are either the poets and novelists who produced the literature of his time or the actual books they wrote acknowledged to have played any role whatever in the intellectual life of this critic. Even the chapter called "Literary Life: New York" does not give the reader quite what its title promises, for it is less concerned with the life of literature than with the shifting and embattled political allegiances of literary intellectuals. Only in a few touching paragraphs that recall the late Isaac Rosenfeld are we given a glimpse into the life of an actual writer, and even this uncharacteristic glimpse falls far short of anything that could be called portraiture. I can think of no other autobiography by a literary critic, in fact, that has so little to say about the life of literature. If we did not know otherwise from Mr. Howe's copious critical writings, we would have to conclude that the art of literature has been a marginal interest for him. Yet this, oddly enough, is the impression that the bulk of *A Margin of Hope* leaves us with.

How are we to account for this curious lapse? Mr. Howe has never struck us as a writer afflicted with an inability to speak his mind. Nor has intellectual modesty ever been a salient feature of his critical style. If he has chosen in this book to give his literary interests—and indeed, his literary ambi-

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tions—so small a place in the story it tells, we must assume it is by design. Exactly what the lineaments of this design are we cannot grasp until we come to understand that *A Margin of Hope* is only incidentally "An Intellectual Autobiography." It is, above all, a political autobiography—or rather, a political polemic cast in an autobiographical form. Every detail of its discourse, from its account of the author's parents to its lengthy rehearsals of disagreements with fellow intellectuals to its ruminations on the fate of the Jews, has been shaped by Mr. Howe's particular political interests. This makes *A Margin of Hope* a far more eccentric book than it may at first appear to be—the political testament of a writer who has made no significant contribution to either political thought or political action.

Mr. Howe has never made any secret of his passion for politics, of course. His polemical exertions on behalf of what, even now, after so much has been recanted, it nonetheless pleases him to call "socialism," are well known. Precisely what this term is meant to encompass has always been something of a problem, however, and with the passage of time it has grown to be so obscure that nowadays it is all but impossible to discern within its shadowy boundaries even the vaguest outline of anything very definite or real. Once upon a time he was a teenage Trotskyist; today he appears to be some sort of unaffiliated liberal whose views on most political questions, if he could ever bring himself to state them clearly and unequivocally, would probably resemble those of Senator Kennedy. But it is not Mr. Howe's political style to state anything very clearly. The old radical mystifications still exert a powerful influence on both his habits of thought and his style of utterance. We always know what he is against, or at least *whom* he is against; we almost never know what he is *for*. This leaves him plenty of room in which to savage his opponents, real or imaginary, while requiring nothing in the way of practical political wisdom. It is a political style that has much in common with a certain kind of religious exhortation—a style that specializes in other people's sins.

The parallel with religion is one frequently invoked by Mr. Howe himself. It appears to have vexed him for a good many years, and the discussion of it—nervous and evasive though it always is—recurs so often in the pages of *A Margin of Hope* that it is no exaggeration to say that it constitutes one of the more interesting leitmotifs of the book itself. Nowhere in *A Margin of Hope* is the parallel as vividly stated, however, as it was years ago in an essay called "Images of Socialism" that Mr. Howe wrote together with his friend and colleague Lewis Coser.[1] In the opening paragraphs of this essay Mr. Howe gave us such a frank and unembarrassed account of his characteristic approach to political questions that they are very much worth quoting, for nothing has really changed for him in the nearly thirty years since "Images of Socialism" made its first appearance.

> "God," said Tolstoy, "is the name of my desire." This remarkable sentence could haunt one a lifetime, it reverberates in so many directions. Tolstoy may have intended partial assent to the idea that, life being unsupportable without some straining toward "transcendence," a belief in God is a psychological necessity. But he must also have wanted to turn this rationalist criticism into a definition of his faith. He must have meant that precisely because his holiest desires met in the vision of God he was enabled to cope with the quite unholy realities of human existence. That God should be seen as the symbolic objectification of his desire thus became both a glorification of God and a strengthening of man, a stake in the future and a radical criticism of the present.
>
> Without sanctioning the facile identification that is frequently made between religion and socialist politics, we should like to twist Tolstoy's remark to our own ends: *socialism is the name of our desire*. And not merely in the sense that it is a vision which, for many people

1 Written in 1954, "Images of Socialism" was reprinted in Mr. Howe's *A World More Attractive* (Horizon Press, 1963).

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> throughout the world, provides moral sustenance, but also in the sense that it is a vision which objectifies and gives urgency to their criticism of the human condition in our time. It is the name of our desire because the desire arises from a conflict with, and an extension from, the world that is; nor could the desire survive in any meaningful way were it not for this complex relationship to the world that is.
>
> At so late and unhappy a moment, however, can one still specify what the vision of socialism means or should mean? Is the idea of utopia itself still a tolerable one?

For the author of *A Margin of Hope,* the "idea of utopia" remains something more than a merely "tolerable one." It is, as far as politics is concerned, his *only* idea, and the fact that it has grown increasingly vague—that it is now an idea lacking any identifiable content—appears to make it all the more precious. The vagueness of Mr. Howe's political beliefs has certainly done nothing to diminish the ardor with which they are upheld—or, indeed, the fury with which he berates anyone holding a contrary view. One has the impression that it is precisely the ardor to which they lend themselves, rather than the efficacy of his beliefs, that now constitutes their special appeal for a man of Mr. Howe's sensibility. Bearing, as they do, little or no relation to the actual life of politics, they serve instead as a screen on which an alternative world of pieties and prescriptions can be projected at will. It is to this shadow-world of images—utopian, portentous, and sterile—that Mr. Howe inevitably and invariably reverts when called upon to pronounce some judgment on the state of the world. It is, so to speak, his spiritual home, and it is from this sanctum of the spirit that he has issued, in *A Margin of Hope,* not an account of his experience but an extended homily on the world's—or at least his fellow intellectuals'—failure to live up to the "socialist" ideal that he has long upheld as a solution to the problems besetting the human race.

It is for this reason, I think, that literature—and Mr. Howe's own literary career—occupy so marginal a place in *A Margin of Hope.* For the art of literature, to the extent that it remains uncorrupted by ideology, addresses itself to the real—to life as it is lived in the workaday world—while utopian political sensibilities like Mr. Howe's are obliged to shun this world in favor of some ideal alternative. As a literary critic Mr. Howe has written many fine pages that focus precisely on this distinction. It has, as a matter of fact, been one of his critical specialties. How very sad, then—and how instructive, too—that in writing *A Margin of Hope* he has allowed the benighted "socialist" to triumph so completely over the enlightened critic.

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Fiction chronicle

Going east

by Joshua Gilder

There are many jokes in *The Joke,* Milan Kundera's recently re-translated first novel.[1] The most extravagant joke of all is the one Kundera plays on his own characters.

It all starts innocently enough: It is 1948, right after the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia. Ludvick is a student at the University, a Party member, and as "unhappy as any woman-less twenty-year-old can be." His despair is only intensified by an especially attractive comrade named Marketa. All his efforts to become intimate with the girl are defeated by her extraordinary literal-mindedness and impregnable revolutionary enthusiasm. In an attempt to shock Marketa out of her complacency, Ludvick sends her a postcard, as a joke, on which he writes: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvick."

The secret police, of course, read the card and don't see the humor. Ludvick must appear before a tribunal. At first he has some reason to be hopeful: Zamenek, a fellow student, has been chosen Party chairman. Zamenek knows Marketa and how tempting it can be to play on her gullibility. He turns out to be an opportunist, however; at the tribunal he delivers a rousing speech recommending Ludvick's expulsion from the Party. The vote is unanimous against Ludvick. Soon afterward, he is drafted into a military penal battalion, and he spends the remainder of his youth working in the mines.

We learn this story in flashbacks (the time of the novel's present is, roughly, 1965). Ludvick, now middle-aged and rehabilitated, meets, by chance Zamenek's wife, Helena. He decides to revenge himself on his old enemy by seducing Helena, but the plan backfires. Zamenek has been separated from her for some time; he now has a pretty, twenty-year-old mistress, a student at the university where he teaches, and is only too glad to be rid of his wife. The most crushing irony of all, however, is that Ludvick realizes that in the climate of liberalization, the man he has hated all his life is probably now his political ally. Ludvick, who wanted to humiliate Zamenek, ends up humiliating only himself—and, of course, Helena, whose humiliation the author makes complete by having her botch a suicide attempt with a bottle of laxatives.

As Kundera explains in a preface to this edition, the "philosophy" of *The Joke* is itself a joke: his characters, "lured on by the voice of utopia, . . . have squeezed their way through the gates of paradise only to find, when the doors slam shut behind them, that they are in hell." Man, caught in the trap of the joke history has played on him, appears "ludicrous. His tragedy lies in the fact that the joke has deprived him of the right to tragedy. He is condemned to triviality." But who has condemned these characters to triviality? Ludvick's rage at Zamenek's betrayal seems entirely justified; his revenge does

1 Harper & Row, 267 pages, $14.95

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appear ill-advised, but this hardly seems the product of historical necessity.

There is a trap that catches up all of Kundera's characters, but it is less history's making than the author's own. In this first novel, the plans of that trap are only sketchily drawn; but in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* (1980), Kundera provides a detailed diagram. In it he imagines a curiously reinvented Christian cosmology, the essential difference being that in Kundera's scheme there are two hells flanking purgatory—and no heaven.

This is all explained in a parable about the two different kinds of laughter in the universe. The Devil's laughter came first; it was the laughter of absolute skepticism and was terribly contagious. The Angel, aware that the Devil's laughter was aimed against God, invented a laughter of his own. He imitated the Devil's sound, but endowed it with opposing qualities. All laughter in the world belongs to one of two realms: the cynical "reign of demons," in which the world loses all meaning, or the "reign of angels," where man collapses under the burden of "too much uncontested meaning." The "reign of angels" is in fact Kundera's allegory for Communist societies, where, as he said in an interview, "angel-fanatics" are "so convinced of their world's significance that they are ready to hang anyone not sharing in it."

This, then, is Kundera's "dual apocalypse," on the one hand the existential void and anomie, on the other the totalitarian promise of a rational paradise turned into a living hell. The main problem with this vision is that it doesn't leave anywhere to turn. One may try to balance on the middle ground, avoiding both extremes, but in Kundera's fiction at least, this is impossible. His characters are always slipping down one side or the other. No matter how innocently things start out, as with Ludvick, they always end badly.

Kundera has been praised for his description of the mechanisms through which Communist society subverts the human spirit. As the highly personal response of a sensitive—and it's not overstating it to say masterful—artist, Kundera's work undoubtedly has great value. Still, there is a disturbing sense in which in his fiction the locus of responsibility is shifted on to the individual. "Forgetting," as the title implies, is the other great theme of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* It opens with the story of the propaganda section airbrushing the image of a Party leader out of hundreds of thousands of photographs after he had been charged with treason and hanged. The narrative begins in 1971: Mirek, an intellectual being hounded by the police, says "that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

But Mirek, too, wants to retouch the past: he is ashamed of his early love for an ugly woman named Zdena, a love engendered in weakness and poverty: "Mirek is as much a rewriter of history as the Communist Party, all parties, all nations, all men. People are always shouting that they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it." The reason that Communist society is so insidiously poisonous, it seems, is that human beings are so weak, defined, like Mirek, almost wholly by their shames and pettinesses—or, like Ludvick, trapped in them. Looking back over all the relationships in these two novels, it's startling to realize that every one of them is founded in misunderstanding and seems to draw its only energy from resentment.

Central to an understanding of Kundera's metaphysics is his image of the "magic circle," the ring of comrades with arms entwined dancing to the hope and joy of Communism's promise. "I too once danced in a ring," writes Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* "It was in the spring of 1948. The Communists had just taken power in my country, the Socialist and Christian Democratic ministers had fled abroad, and I took other Communist students by the hand, I put my arms around their shoulders, and we took two steps in place, one step forward . . . we smiled the

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smile of happiness. Then one day I said something I would have better left unsaid. I was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle." Twice in *The Book* Kundera imagines this ring of dancers ascending to the heavens: ". . . and as I ran after that voice through the streets in the hope of keeping up with the wonderful wreath of bodies rising above the city, I realized with anguish in my heart that they were flying like birds and I was falling like a stone." He has, he says, been falling ever since.

Kundera writes that those who have been expelled from the ring "always retain a muted nostalgia for the circle dance." Well, not all. Not Solzhenitsyn, for instance. But Kundera is tied to a dream in which he can no longer believe. He recognizes the horror it has produced in reality, but he can dream no other dream, imagine no other ideal.

This may help us to understand the enthusiasm of Kundera's reception here. A great many intellectuals in this country, it seems, are in the same fix as Kundera. They share his dream, and he perfectly expresses their futility. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (parts of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*) is the first real cosmological rationalization for contemporary literature, with its ever present sense of human failure and doom. How often we hear that despair, anomie, the void are the serious questions confronting modern man. In fact, existential maladies are for some people entirely comfortable. They affirm the barrenness of the universe and justify barren dreams.

One hears a kind of laughter ringing throughout Jiří Gruša's *The Questionnaire*,[2] too, a laughter full of the appreciation of irony, but not in the least bit cynical.

Gruša has published two books of poetry, both highly acclaimed in his homeland, and five other novels, but this is the first to be translated into English. When *samizdat* publishers first printed *The Questionnaire* in 1978, the Czech government arrested Gruša for initiating dissent and charged him with writing the novel "out of hostility toward the socialist order of the state." After several months in prison, he was asked to leave the country; since 1981 he has been living in West Germany.

The novel opens as Jan Kepka, the narrator, goes to the offices of GRANIT to fill out his sixteenth job application in two years. In contrast to previous questionnaires, this one is marked with large letters: DO NOT CROSS OUT. He finds this significant, in fact encouraging. In the past he had simply deleted questions that didn't apply to him, those for instance, that referred to events taking place before his birth. This application, he decides, is a challenge, an invitation; he will fill it out as instructed.

And so we have *The Questionnaire,* in which Jan tells his life story, starting as a sentient egg, a spectator at the scene of his conception in a pile of leaves, and moving on to his vigorous objection, *in utero,* when an aunt suggests that his teenage mother get an abortion ("my participation in the domestic resistance movement"). He describes his birth: "I kept on saying to myself: my God, why is my head so big . . . I wanted to stop myself, I suddenly realized that I was falling into—Chlumec, Bohemia—I wanted time-out to think things over, to reconsider . . . . I resigned myself to the impending new locus of my activity (see Question 4: Temporary Domicile); I obeyed Mother as in fact I have always done in matters of importance." In answer to another question, which puts him in mind of a questionnaire employees in the family business had to fill out under Nazi occupation, Jan traces his mother's "Jewish eyes" back through the generations and history of Chlumec to the Middle Ages. Jan tends toward dreams and visions—and his homunculus seems to be able to travel in time.

The weaving of fantasy and history reminds one of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* But, in contrast to Marquez's isolated South American village, Chlumec is at the very crossroads, or stomping grounds, of twentieth-century European history: Jan sees the rule of the Nazi regime

2 Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 278 pages, $15.95

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and mass executions, the installation of the Communist government and its labor camps, and finally the Russian invasion in 1968. The playing out of such forces is hardly calculated to lift the spirits, but somehow Gruša manages to mix the retelling of tragic events with humor and irony. (At times, he puts one in mind of Prokofiev, another citizen of a totalitarian regime, in whose music passages of great sadness and slapstick parody so often sound together.) It helps that through it all Jan is taken up with—really obsessed by—women. The sexuality Gruša evokes is almost visionary: it seems to burst history's bounds and affirm the individual against malevolent forces, and it occasions some of the most lyrical and humorous passages to be found in the book, or indeed, in any literature today.

According to Richard Sennett, a professor of sociology at New York University and the author of *Authority,* among other books, "the closet is a wonderful metaphor for Eastern European intellectuals." This Sennett told an interviewer from *Christopher Street* upon the publication of *The Frog Who Dared to Croak,* which can best be described as an ersatz East European novel attempting to illustrate the point.

The protagonist of *The Frog Who Dared to Croak*[3] is Tibor Grau, a Hungarian Marxist with homosexual proclivities. Born to an aristocratic family, Grau spends much of his adolescence cruising the parks of his hometown; later he participates as a propaganda minister in the short-lived Republic of Hungary.

After exile in Vienna and Russia—he serves as an interpreter for the Russians during the war—he returns to Hungary to play an ambiguous role in the 1956 uprising. We learn of Grau's life from fragments of various official documents, newspaper clippings, and personal letters, papers that Grau, now retired and living in Budapest, hides from the searches of the police.

Sennett explains in the interview: ". . . the problem of disguise which gay people have here has a great deal to do with the problem of disguise that anyone has in Eastern Europe. Any intellectual. So in that sense I think it's not just accidental that this man is gay. It's really the key to understanding the kind of dilemma that an artist or intellectual would have in a country like Hungary." Even if this were plausible (which it is not), having presented the two parts of the analogy in one character, Sennett does nothing with it novelistically. Grau has hardly any substance as a character, and his homosexuality becomes a kind of floating fact with nothing to attach itself to.

The absence of character, in fact, creates a moral vacuum at the heart of this book. Sennett may wish to demonstrate that in a society in which the truth is merely provisional, and frequently forced to contradict itself, the individual's sense of himself too becomes provisional. But without certain rudiments of fictional creation—having to do with the scenes, dialogue, and description that create character—there is nothing for the changes or compromises of character to register on. At one point during the uprising, Grau urges his countrymen not to try to throw off Soviet domination because at best this will bring them under the control of the United States. Is this simply a "strategic truth" for Grau, or does he believe it, if only temporarily? That's difficult to say. A book that is so thoroughly ambiguous can have as its point of reference only that ambiguity.

In a curious way, this book, though apparently intended as a story of political oppression, reads more like a tale of liberation. Existing as he does in a society where the truth is either provisional or arbitrary, Grau is liberated from perhaps the most onerous burden of all: the necessity for moral choice.

3 Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 192 pages, $11.95

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Notebook

Dwight Macdonald 1906-1982

by Hilton Kramer

With the death of Dwight Macdonald on December 19, the surviving remnant of the old *Partisan Review* circle has been deprived of its most ebullient spirit. Macdonald was the most famous as well as the most brilliant and admired journalist to emerge from that circle, and he was in certain respects the most exotic of the many talents that it nurtured. He was the supreme example in our time of a type that has been very little written about—the political dandy who finds in radical doctrine, no matter what that doctrine happens at the moment to espouse, the materials for fashioning a personal aesthetic.

Such writers are often taken to be moralists, and this was frequently the case with Macdonald, especially in the period (1944-1949) when he was editing the journal called *politics*. Indeed, he was ridiculed by his friends on *Partisan Review* at that time for advocating what they characterized as a position of "moral uplift." And in the strange amalgam of anarchism and pacifism that was vigorously upheld in the pages of *politics,* there was certainly much to ridicule. For what did the morality of this moralism consist of? Except for his consistent and admirable opposition to Stalinism—Macdonald's sole claim to political wisdom—it would be difficult to say. And even on this crucial issue he was often quite foolish. As late as 1948, for example, he could write as follows without any sense of embarrassment or contradiction:

> Let us admit at once—let us, indeed, insist on the point—that all the criticisms made of USSR could also be made of USA. Ours, like theirs, is an unjust society, where the few have too much and the many too little. Ours is an imperialist State, like theirs, whose leaders lie like troopers and equivocate like lawyers; a militarist State, like theirs, busily preparing for World War III; a repressive State, like theirs, which is about to draft its youth, in peacetime, against their will . . . . Our culture, too, is a debased mass culture, ruled by commerce as theirs is by the Central Committee.[1]

Statements of this sort did not represent any sort of temporary lapse on Macdonald's part. They were an essential element of his thought. Seven years earlier, in the "10 Propositions on the War" that he wrote for *Partisan Review* with Clement Greenberg, he had offered a similar judgment: "In the war or out of it, the United States faces only one future under capitalism: fascism." It was for this reason, among others, that the last of these "Propositions" urged that *"All support of whatever kind must be withheld from Churchill and Roosevelt"* in opposing Hitler.[2] Yet the author of these and many similar statements regarded himself, and was regarded by others, as some sort of expert qualified

1 *Memoirs of a Revolutionist,* page 311.

2 "10 Propositions on the War" appeared in the July-August 1941 issue of *Partisan Review.* The emphasis, by the way, is in the original.

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to speak with authority on the subjects of totalitarianism and democracy.

The truth is, alas, that there was much in Macdonald's political writing that can only be described as frivolous, and everybody knew it. Indeed, everybody relished the comedy of it, and savored the successive and often wildly contradictory manifestations of it, while agreeing to pretend that there was something really at stake in the intellectual vaudeville acts that he performed so consummately. Everyone, that is, except his obituarist in *The New York Times.* We all know that writers of obituaries are not exactly under oath to tell the whole truth about their subjects. No doubt it would be dreadful for us all if they were. But even so, Macdonald's obituary in the *Times* was remarkable in several respects. It managed to overlook his most notorious political stand—his highly vocal opposition to the war waged by the capitalist democracies against Hitler—which, had it been mentioned, might have placed his later opposition to the war in Vietnam (as well as much else) in an illuminating perspective. It also managed to overlook his most sensational triumph as a literary critic—the attack on James Gould Cozzens's novel, *By Love Possessed,* that appeared in the January 1958 issue of *Commentary* and had the effect of bringing the literary career of that best-selling author to a virtual standstill.

The *Commentary* episode was only one of the important details omitted from the *Times* obituary. Another was the term that Macdonald served in the Fifties as a regular columnist for *Encounter* in London. Could it just possibly be that these professional attachments were thought to pose a danger to Macdonald's highly polished reputation as an exemplary radical? One can only suppose so. Some mention of them, however, would surely have placed one of the encomia quoted in the obituary—"He is one of the very few political and social thinkers since 1940 to have maintained independence of mind . . ."—in a somewhat more instructive context.

It is not, in any case, as a political writer that Macdonald is likely to survive. He once described his own "natural bent" as tending "toward individualism, empiricism, moralism, aestheticism," and it is in the last of these—in Macdonald's all-encompassing aestheticism—that the unity of his sensibility and his point of view is to be found. The aesthete is marked, above all, by his distastes, and it was these, after all, more than any particular moral or political issue, that shaped Macdonald's posture as a political dandy and as a critic of democracy and its culture. Baudelaire observed of the dandy that he was driven by "the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions. It is a kind of cult of the ego . . . which can even survive what are called illusions. It is the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself." This, I think, is a pretty accurate description of Macdonald's special quality both as a writer and as a moralist.

But the dandy, of course, is never admired first of all for the substance of his thought. He is admired for the style he brings to it, and for the gesture that is traced in his attitude toward the world. And if the attitude proves in the end to be both politically irresponsible and morally unheeding and even a little snobbish—as I believe, in Macdonald's case, it was—we are still left with the style itself to savor. Whether they are quite aware of it or not, it is this—and the image of the radical as dandy—that Macdonald's fans are left with.

Many of Macdonald's old radical friends were surprised when he joined the staff of *The New Yorker,* and wondered how he survived there for so many years. He had written, in 1937, one of the most cogent criticisms ever devoted to that magazine, and seemed to belong to a different world. Yet their wonder proved to be misdirected. For Macdonald was himself the Eustace Tilley of American radicalism, and it was only in the pages of Tilley's journal that this political dandy found his true spiritual home.

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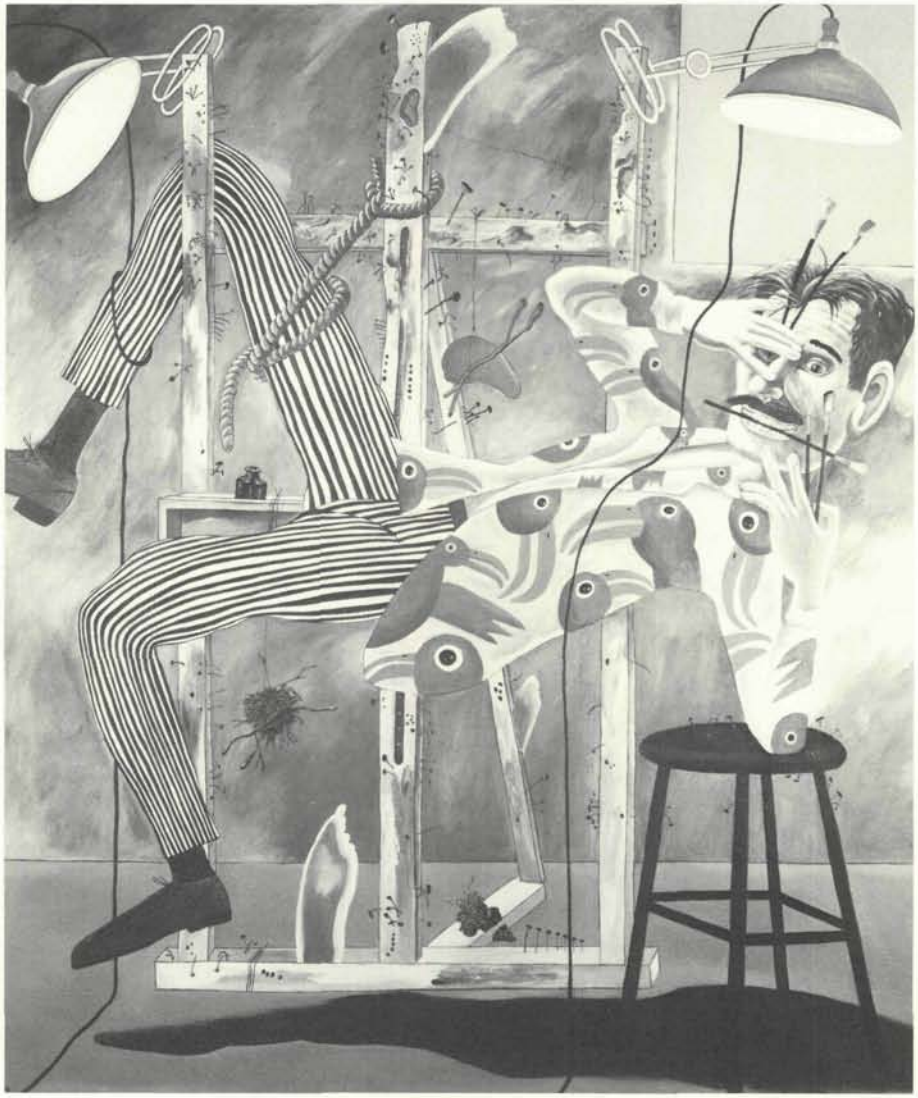

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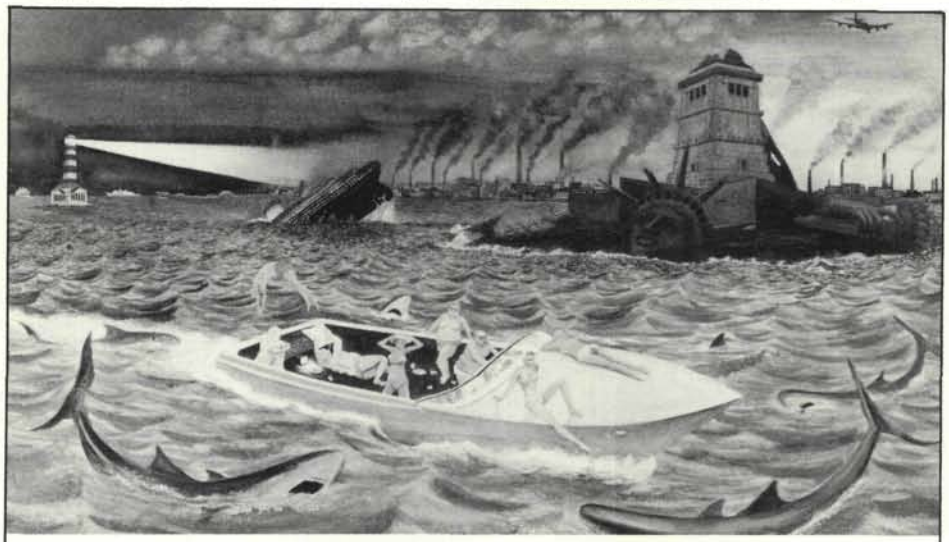

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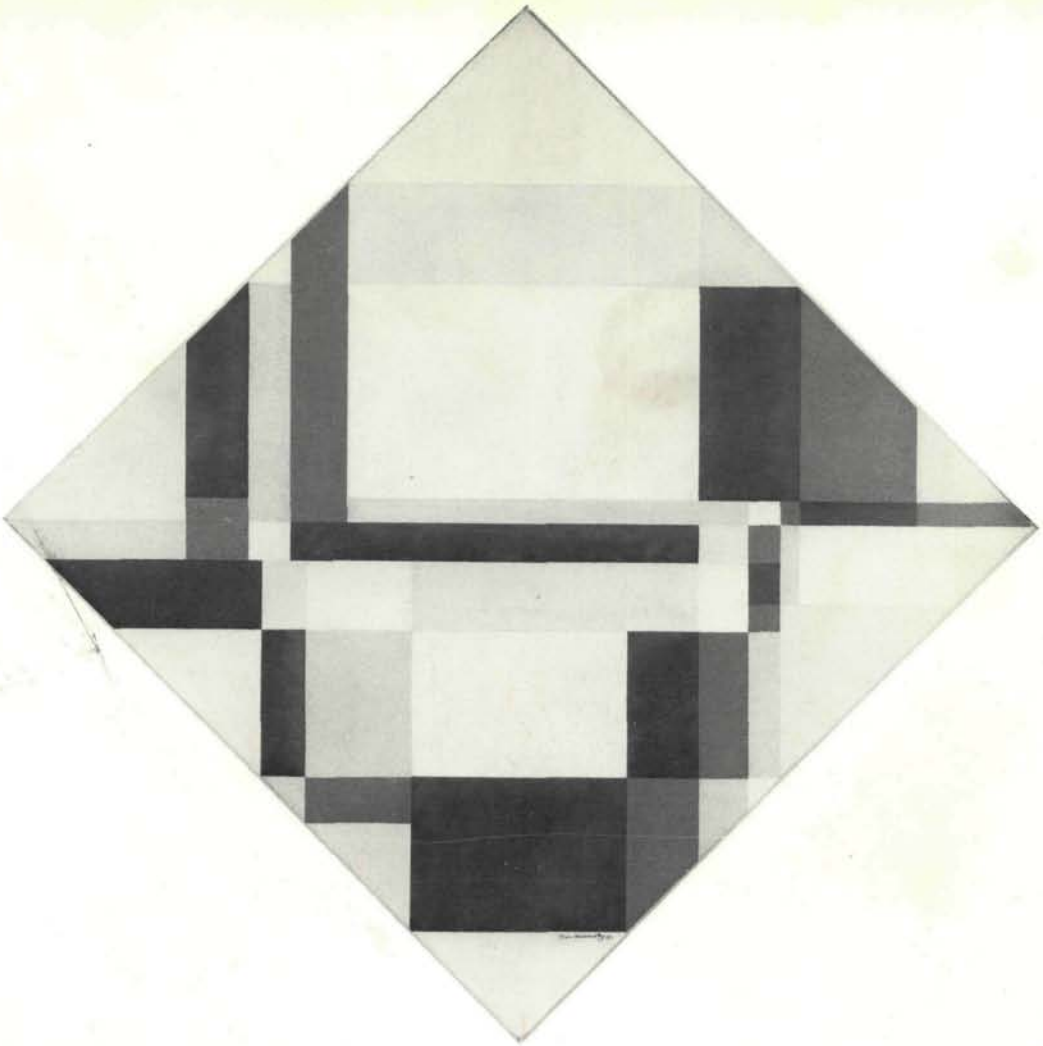

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